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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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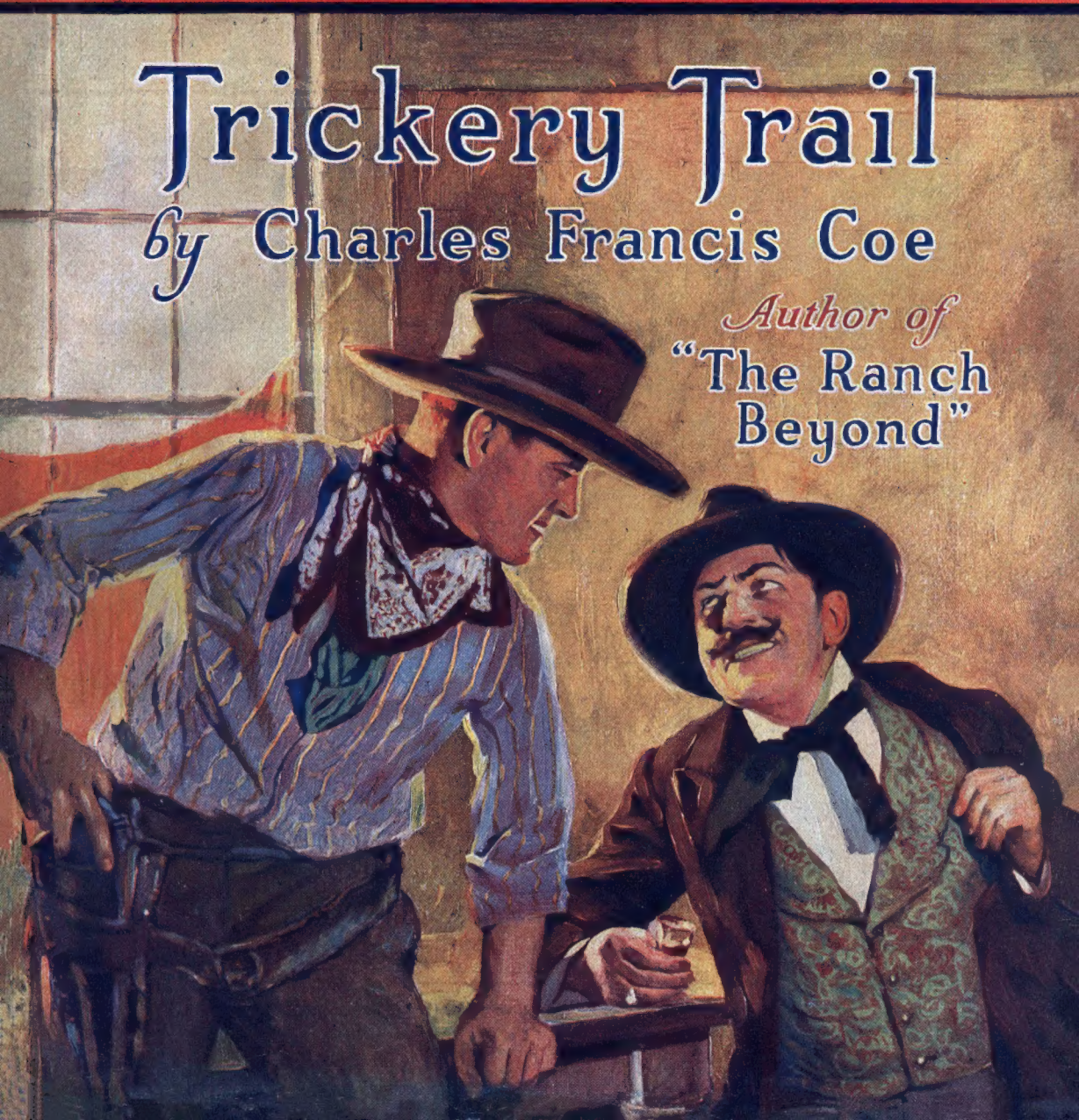

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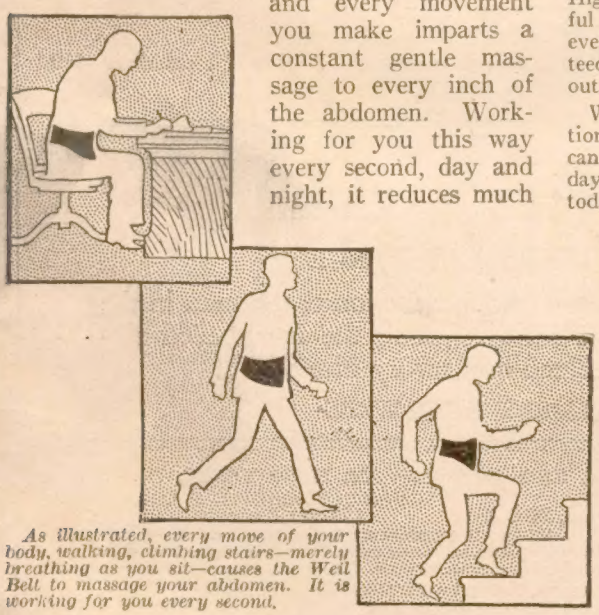

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VOL. CLXXVII CONTENTS FOR APRIL 24, 1926 NUMBER 1

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FOUR CONTINUED STORIES

Trickery Trail . . . . . Charles Francis Coe . . . 1
A Five-Part Story — Part One

"I Did It!" . . . . . Garret Smith 54
A Four-Part Story — Part Two

A Small Town Guy . . . . . C. C. Waddell 82
A Four-Part Story — Part Three

West of Broadway . . . . . Fred MacIsaac 111
A Five-Part Story — Part Five

NOVELETTE AND SHORT STORIES

The Bar-J Republic . . . . . Kenneth Perkins 28
Ninth Man of the Eight . . . . . John Barker Hyde . . . 75
Green-Eyed . . . . . Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift . 102
The Proper Niche . . . . . Gordon Stiles 131
The Infant of Death . . . . . F. St. Mars 137
The Noose . . . . . Raymond Emery Lawrence . 142
Fair Enough . . . . . Will McMorrow 151

POETRY

Life, the Huntsman . . Margaret Ashmun 74 | Some Improvement . . Will H. Hendrickson 110
Why? . . . . . H. A. Woodbury, Jr. 141

SOLDIERS ALL

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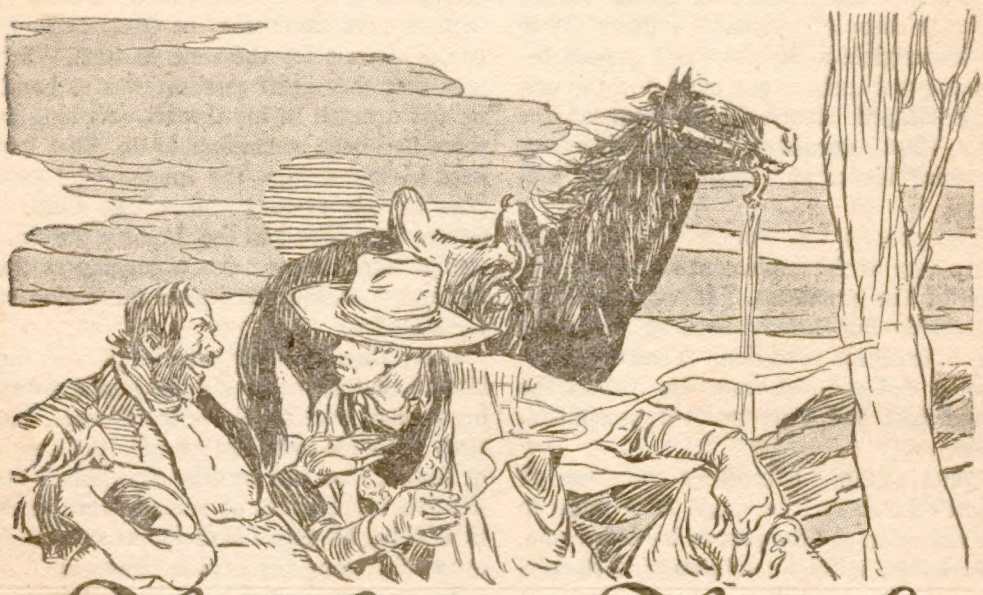

Trickery Trail

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

Author of "The Ranch Beyond," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SHATTERED HOPES.

CHET MILLS wet a thumb and forefinger, and returned to a most unsatisfactory struggle with a refractory neckerchief. For some reason that Chet was quite unable to discover, there was one end of the neck ornament which persisted in standing erect. The result was that it peeked from behind his left ear in such a manner as to give that member the appearance of magnification.

Chet was a cowboy and knew full well the importance of keeping one's ears from resembling those of a well-known creature easily recognized by the length of its auricular appendages.

"Shucks," he grumbled, after squeezing, patting, pressing, and creasing the end without the desired effect. "Ain't that my luck now? I paid a scand'lous price for this here piece of finery, and now I can't tie it worth seein'!" Having thus expressed his sentiment, he returned to the hopeless process with a patience born of long and lonely nights of range riding.

But even patience cannot achieve the

impossible. The knot was tied in such fashion that the objectionable end reared itself upward just as naturally as rain falls to the earth.

"It's a poor man that don't know when he's licked," Chet grunted, finally. Then, with the abandon of defeat and the purposefulness of determination, he scouted around the bunk house until he had located the new razor of "Silent" Pulver. With the incorrigible neckerchief end gripped between two fingers of one hand and the new razor clasped firmly in the grip of the other, Chet returned to the cracked mirror at which his careful toilet had been prepared.

The process was simple. He drew the sharp edge of the implement across the texture of the ornament. It was necessary to whittle but briefly because the razor was in excellent condition. Then the bothersome end escaped from the rest of the neckerchief and Chet grinned in appreciation.

Quite calmly he returned the razor to Silent's bunk rack, stepped once more to the mirror to pat the part of his hair again, then seized his new sombrero, and stepped back to view himself.

Any reasonable girl, he assured himself, must hand it to him on the score of dress. No man ever yet had a snappier purple shirt than the one he wore! He was sure of it. And not only the shirt itself, but the subdued yellow checks that ran through it! They lent a touch of refinement that pleased his sense of the artistic immensely.

Add to that the nice, green neckerchief which he finally had mastered and what more was to be asked? His hat, he admitted, was a little worn and stained with the sun and the rain. But a fellow took his hat off as soon as he met a girl anyway! No need for worry there, that Chet could see.

His riding pants, too, were somewhat below the standard set by the shirt and the neckerchief, but pants have been utilitarian more than decorative since man first adopted them! There is really nothing romantic about pants. They associate themselves indubitably with the masculine and they serve their purpose unostentatiously.

His boots were a thing to be proud of. The heels were higher than any others he had ever seen. And, around the tops of the boots, just below the knees, they were chased with a design that was the final touch of masculine fitness.

So he was ready to go.

The thought thrilled him inexpressibly. Ready to go! He had looked forward to that moment all during the day. Scarcely could he wait for the time to start. But now that that great moment was at hand, he felt a catch in his throat! As long as there had been something to do, Chet had kept his mind from the fundamental purpose of this evening call. Now that all things were done and the time for the start was at hand, there came a gagging at the throat. A sinking feeling in the region of the stomach!

After three or four months of assuring himself that she really did like him and that his chances were far above the average, and that, with his new clothes and the depth of the love he was to offer this girl of his dreams, his chances of success were more than even, he now found his nerve oozing away like snow before a summer sun.

He paused, rolled himself a cigarette, puffed uncertainly a few times, then straightened.

"A faint heart never gathers no moss and shouldn't be throwin' stones!" he rasped. "I sure ain't man enough for her if I ain't man enough to ask her! Right here and now this thing gets settled final!"

He strode from the bunk house and went to the corral. His pony trotted to the bars and stuck its soft nose forward to be caressed. Chet rummaged his saddle from the rail near at hand and tossed it on the animal's back.

"Rags," he muttered, as he drew the cinches, "this here is our big night. We're ridin' down to the Flyin' Circle Ranch, and we're goin' to have a heart to heart talk with this gal of mine! Hear me, Rags? A heart to heart talk!—in hoss talk that means that I'm goin' to make this gal travel double from now on—if I can."

Rags, a jet black creature with two white front feet, a white nose and a white star on his forehead, tossed his ears quite as though

he understood the affair, and gladly lent his moral support to the amazing campaign. Then Chet swung into the saddle, and as they turned toward the open plains he drew forth his tobacco and rolled himself another smoke.

The Flying Circle lay but six or seven miles away. Rags knew the way as well as Chet himself, and sensing from experience that Chet would be in a hurry going and might be in no hurry at all returning, he struck into a sharp canter as soon as he heard the match struck.

It was an old process to him, this evening ride to the Flying Circle. Sometimes he stayed very late and others he returned quite early. Sometimes Chet would let him amble over the silent plains at his own gait, and the voice of the rider would be lifted in splendid songs of the plains.

Again, and this usually took place when they did not stay very late, Chet would put him to his best pace all the way back home and there would be no songs, no flow of conversation from the man in the saddle. Lots of it Rags quite understood if his actions could be taken as indicative. Much of it he did not understand.

But he certainly seemed to sense that this night was one on which Chet was extremely interested in that ride. There was a tensity about his master's knees as he sat the saddle that spoke volumes to the shrewd little animal. Chet did not sing, either. He was strangely silent for most of the way, and when he did finally talk, Rags saw that the words were not addressed to him and that the tone of voice was one entirely strange to his ears.

"Sweetheart," Chet muttered passionately, "sweetheart, you sure can see that my heart is afire with love! I'm plumb loco over you and aimin' to team up double and bust open happiness like Washington busted open independence!—that ain't so bad, Rags!" I reckon she thinks right now I never heard o' Washington! It don't do no harm to let 'em see that you are a guy with some substance, huh?—I'll be great if I ever get started, Rags—it's a little tough startin', though—"

The horse made short work of the six miles. They whirled up to the ranch in the most approved fashion and Chet, after he had slipped from the saddle, walked around under Rags's nose and petted him. There was an affectionate word whispered to the horse, too, a word without which Rags would have felt terribly slighted. Then Chet turned and walked onto the great porch, and Rags saw the door opened and heard the girl's voice as she greeted his master.

"Howdy, Evelyn, howdy," Chet said, as the two stood for a moment in the doorway. "This here is a right fine night, ain't it?"

Then the door closed behind them. The girl's father and mother sat in the one big room. They greeted Chet in kindly manner and the father asked several questions about the neighboring ranch and the men who operated it. Chet answered in kind. He was very much upset. One moment he seemed stifling with heat and a desire to proclaim his love before them all. The next he was bordering upon chill and promising himself that he would say nothing to any one, least of all the girl!

"Oh, you have a new neckerchief, Chet!" the girl noticed. "How lovely! Get it in town?"

"Yes'm—yeah—got 'er in town," Chet agreed.

"But what on earth have you been doing to it, Chet?" the girl queried as she stepped close to him and reached for the end he had snipped off with Silent's razor.

"Eh? Oh, that!" Chet fussed. "Well, they built the thing so's the corners wouldn't lay. You know how a calf's ears look the first day or two it's born, one goes up and 'tother down, both of 'em lop all over the critter's head—that's what this was doin'; so I tied 'er up first, and then trimmed 'er down to fit!"

"You shore trimmed 'er plenty, Chet," the father avowed, as he glanced up. "The edge of 'er looks like a buzz saw what has tangled up with a brandin' iron!"

"Ain't he the dude to-night, though!" the girl tormented further. "Nice new shirt, too! Purple and yellow! My goodness, Chet, that purple and yellow shirt, and that green neckerchief don't fit any too good with that red hair of yours, and them freckles!"

"They don't?" Chet queried, hurt just a little by the implied criticism. "I reckoned they was right swell! I ain't much of a hand for styles somehow."

"Nobody ain't goin' to call you one o' these silent knights, in them clothes, Chet," the father assured him, grinningly. "You look like a torch!"

"Let the boy alone, you two," the mother interjected. "He's rode over here to pay us his respecks, ain't he?"

"Has he?" the father responded, still grinning. "I never suspected you come over to see me much, Chet."

Chet's freckles disappeared in a flood of crimson that served both to make his discomfiture quite evident and to stifle any reply he might have tried to make. The girl, too, blushed some, at which the father guffawed in delight and the mother gathered up her sewing and rose.

"Come along, pa," she half ordered. "Leave the young folks to themselves. You and me is too old-fashioned to entertain 'em much, I reckon."

Still laughing, the man rose and started to leave the room. Chet found his voice:

"You'll be settin' up awhile, won't you, Mr. Fisher? I want a talk with you, mebbe, later on—"

"Shore. Come along out on the porch now, Chet."

"No—let 'er wait awhile, please," Chet floundered. "I ain't ready yet!"

Both the older people went out on the porch where Chet could hear the soft mumble of their voices as they talked. He knew very well that they were aware of the cause of his request. The girl herself seemed to know when he turned toward her again.

He tried very hard to be cool, but the force of his emotions was too great to conceal. He felt much as he had once before when he forced his way into a gambling place after a gunman who was ensconced there. There was a trying ordeal ahead, and the best thing to be done was to meet it promptly.

"Evelyn," he began, his voice strained and high-pitched. "I reckon I ain't much for looks, clothes or no clothes."

"Nope," she grinned, frankly, "I reckon you ain't, Chet!"

"That's right—but looks ain't everything."

"Not—everything!"

"Are they very much?"

"I—well—pretty much—Chet."

"How much?"

"Quite a lot."

Chet, long accustomed to these visits and possessed of the liberties accorded an old visitor, fished out his tobacco and rolled himself a smoke. When it was burning, he stepped toward the open fireplace, and cast the burned match into the ashes.

"Ain't you goin' to sit down, Evelyn?" he asked.

The girl pulled a chair around and seated herself. Chet seized the back of another and drew it close to hers. He smoked for several moments in silence, occasionally flicking the ashes of his cigarette into the fireplace.

He was not groping for words with which to bring his attack against the citadel of feminine wiles. Rather his silence was a flexing of the muscles of courage. He knew about what he wanted to say, all that he needed was the courage to begin. The girl sat as might one in judgment.

"Evelyn, I been comin' here to see you a right long while," Chet ventured, finally.

"That's right, Chet. Time goes by mighty fast, don't it?"

"Yeah," he grinned, "it sure does!" After that there was another prolonged silence. It seemed to Chet that words were a lost art. Of all the words that constituted his vocabulary, there was none friendly enough to present to his mind.

"Rags made it over here in twenty minutes to-night," he told her then.

"He did? You come a runnin', didn't you? Rags is the finest horse I ever saw!"

"Finest hoss anybody ever saw!" Chet maintained, stoutly. "I taught him another trick to-day, too. Every time I ask him to add up some numbers he paws with his hoof for each time I wave my hand. Looks just like he's really addin' 'em up!"

"That's fine. He's a great horse. Smartest thing I ever saw on hoofs. You oughta be proud of him, Chet."

"I am."

Chet paused again to apply another

match to his smoke. His hand trembled some as he held the flame close to the tobacco. He fumbled a little with the match, then threw it among the ashes and took several deep inhalations of the smoke.

"I come over here to-night to tell you somethin', Evelyn," he mumbled, finally, his gaze steadily trained upon his own feet.

"Somethin' about Rags?" She asked naïvely.

"Nope. Somethin' about me."

"Got a raise, did you? I'm right glad."

"Nope—gee!—women sure can ask questions when a fellow's doin' his best to talk!"

"I ain't asked any unreasonable questions!"

"No—course not. Only—I got somethin' to say, Evelyn!"

"Well—say it! I'm listenin'."

"I reckon you are, awright. I said it fine comin' over here. I can't seem to get started on it now—" he raised his eyes toward hers, and grinned inanely. There was no responding smile on the girl's face, and Chet immediately sobered and returned his gaze to the safety of his boots.

"You got somethin' to say to pa, too, accordin' to what you said. I should think you'd be able to say what you want to!"

"I thought I would, too, Evelyn—but it's mighty hard on a fellow. Couldn't you help me just a little bit?"

"What a crazy thing to say! How do I know what you want to talk about? How can I help you?"

"Ain't you got even an idee what I'm thinkin'?"

"Of course not! What on earth are you talkin' about, Chet Mills?"

Chet was suddenly rendered desperate. He whirled upon the girl so suddenly that she recoiled in surprise.

"Evelyn, I reckon I was goin' to say I want you to marry me!" The astounding truth that he had actually said this thing gave Chet an unsuspected strength to continue. "Honest, Evelyn, I love you more'n you even think about! I'd do anything for you, and I'll work mighty hard to take care of you, and we'd be right happy, I reckon—"

"Marry you!" Evelyn gasped. "Chet, you don't really mean that you're proposin' to me?"

"Sure as hell I am! I ain't doin' nothin' else, Evelyn! I want you to marry me—" Chet got no further.

The girl threw back her head and burst into a gale of laughter. Once more the freckled face was suffused in a mantle of fiery red. But, seeming paradox that it is, the features of Chet Mills were as pale as they were flushed. For the red centered in the cheeks of the young man and his temples and jaws were white.

"You—laughin' at me—Evelyn?" he demanded.

"Of course I'm laughin' at you! Marry you! I reckon you've lost your head, ain't you, Chet?"

"I love you," Chet maintained stoutly.

"But I don't love you! Why—how could you ever imagine such a thing? Red hair—a million freckles—"

It dawned upon Chet that this girl was actually laughing to scorn the depths of his love for her. He did not believe it possible, yet there was no doubting the evidence of his own eyes and ears.

He jumped to his feet, his eyes blazing.

"Sure I got freckles—I got red hair—but I'm a man! The more I think about it, the more I reckon I'm too damn good a man for the likes o' you!"

"What do you mean, Chet Mills?" The girl too rose and faced the man whose love she had been offered. Her own eyes were fairly spitting fire.

"I mean just what I say, Evelyn. I reckon no gal that 'll insult a man what offers her everything he's got, or ever hopes to have, is good enough for that man! What's red hair? What's freckles? I got a mighty good heart that you could 'a' had!"

"Your red head and your freckles show! I ain't ever seen your heart!" she sneered.

"I reckon you never will, now, Evelyn," Chet returned as he reached for his hat. "I reckon we'll just forget all that's been said, huh?"

He strode toward the door, and the girl let him go without a word. As he flung out onto the porch he heard her laugh again.

She was laughing at him, the preposterous idea that she might love him as he did her!

"Goin' so soon, Chet?" the girl's father called from his seat on the porch. "Thought you was wantin' a word with me—"

"That can wait, Mr. Fisher," Chet snapped. "I reckon it can wait forever, for all o' me!"

Then he called to Rags, and the horse came to him. Chet Mills swung into the saddle, and for the first time that the horse could remember he dug his heels deep into the animal's sides.

Rags flashed away into the night like an arrow.

CHAPTER II.

REAL FRIENDS.

OVERHEAD the moon had risen in all its silver splendor. The undulating plains were like the shadowy carpet of a monarch's throne. Far to the right of man and rider there gleamed the shimmering surface of the river as it wound its life-giving way through the grazing grounds.

All of this was lost to Chet Mills. He knew simply that, in addition to the dashing of his romance, he had been bitterly hurt. Not only had Evelyn Fisher shown that she did not love him; she had actually scoffed at the very thought. She had treated him with disdain; he might have been some inferior creature.

The rush of balmy air soon took the sharp edge of his temper and left only the aching knowledge of things as they were. He felt that he could not return at once to the ranch. All the things about the place would loom in his mind as taunts. Even the mirror before which he had made his final preparations would leer into his face from its place on the bunk house wall.

He reined his pony in and sat silent for a moment. Far in the distance sounded the staccato bark of a prairie dog. It sounded like a laugh to Chet. Such a laugh as he had heard from the girl when he left the house behind him. He clamped his teeth in a flash of anger, then his soul seemed to well up within him and the grief therein about overcame his control.

It was all so stark, so frightfully glaring, this thing of scorn. If the girl had taken his hand and told him in kindly tone that she did not love him, that would be a totally different thing. He could ascribe a thousand reasons why she should not care for him to the point of wedding him. But he could find no reason at all why the girl should treat him as she had.

"Rags, old hoss," he muttered, "that gal is a hellion! I reckon I can't help feelin' like I do—I thought a heap of her. But she's a right mean critter at heart to deal me that way!"

He slid from the saddle and sat upon a mound. The horse, obviously surprised at this most unusual of all homeward trips, moved close to him and held his nose down for a caress. He got it.

"Rags, hosses and men is one thing; women is another. Am I right? Say yes."

The horse pawed the ground once with his right hoof.

"Of course I'm right," Chet announced after gaining this mechanical confirmation. "And a fellow shouldn't hope to have nothin' satisfactory with women, should he, Rags? Say no."

Once again the hoof scratched the ground; this time the move was repeated.

"Two for no—that's right, Rags," Chet agreed. "You and me git along fine. There ain't any arguments from you, and I reckon what's in your heart for me is about what's in mine for her. Am I right again? Say yes, anyhow."

Chet grinned a little as the hoof pawed once.

"Good old hoss! By golly, you and me'll ride double as long as we ride at all, Rags! I never did see so smart a hoss! Can you see my hand? Let's see if you forgot what I taught you. How many's one and one?"

While the horse cocked his head intently Chet moved his hand ever so slightly. Each time the hand moved, the horse pawed in company with it. There was no chance for error there. Even in the moonlight Rags kept his eye fastened on that hand and responded in perfect fashion.

"Never forget nothin', do you, old hoss?" Chet grinned admiringly. "I swear, Rags, if t'wasn't for you to-night I reckon I'd do somethin' terrible foolish! I wonder if hosses get feelin's like I got? S'pose I should sell you, Rags, would it bust you up way down inside till something down there swelled up so much it pushed the water right outen your eyes? Would it? I'm bettin' it would!"

He sat for some time, then found solace in a cigarette. Occasionally a stray cloud would float slowly across the silver heavens. Now and then its fleecy substance would lace across the face of the moon and great shadows would appear on the ground beside the horse and man and twist into grotesque and ogrelike figures.

"Troubles is like gettin' somethin' in your eye, Rags," Chet offered finally. "I worked once for ten minutes gettin' something outa my eye. While it was in there it felt like a big rock. When I got it out it was so little I wasn't even sure I had it!

"I bet if we was in the moon lookin' at them clouds we wouldn't even see 'em, they'd be so small. Down here they make shadows 'most as big as a county, I reckon! It's all in where you're lookin' from, huh, Rags? Even rocks don't hurt much if they're in the other fellow's eye!

"I reckon I better start blinkin' right now and blink till I wash away this here achin' void, as the poet fellow says. Let's git goin', old hoss!"

The psychology was good, but the ache too great to respond. Every thump of Rags's hoofs seemed to land fairly upon the heart of his master. Once or twice Chet ran the back of his hand across his eyes and muttered to himself that the wind of riding never affected him that way before. Like many others of his kind, Chet started his battle for a new happiness by trying to convince himself that he really was not unhappy anyway.

He turned Rags into the corral and tossed the saddle over the rail. The exertion convinced him that every muscle in his body had suddenly centered in his heart and that the slightest move he made would forevermore twist the strings of his deepest consciousness.

His good night caress to Rags was an unusual one. He took the soft nose into his arm, held it there for a long time with his cheek pressed against the animal's face. Then he kissed the white star on the forehead and immediately whirled away as though even Rags might laugh at his emotion.

There was still a light in the bunk house, but it went out as the sound of his footsteps heralded his return. He pushed open the door and entered.

"A courtin' he would go, a courtin' he would go,
A ridin' forth for romancin', the gay Lothario!"

The song, or fragment of it, was sung by the possessor of a raucous bass voice. There were one or two snickers of laughter from other bunks, and a resounding bit of advice which wound up in "Shut up." Chet paid no heed. He knew better than to light the lamp. That would be akin to challenge for a fist fight with all the men in the place.

Instead he went to his bunk, sat upon the edge of it, and tossed his hat in the general direction of the table and benches in the center of the room. After that he slipped off the green neckerchief, held it a moment thoughtfully, then wadded it unfeelingly between his two hands and cast it underfoot. When the sleeve of the wonderful purple shirt proved too tight to slip easily over his hand, he yanked it so hard that the button flew against the bunk overhead with a sharp pop.

So much for romance! He would purge his soul thereof! He had been a fool, anyway—should have known better. Think of all the boons of freedom! If she had married him, he would have had to quit the bunk house, leave all his good pals, and wash his hands before every meal.

Why hadn't he thought of those things before? Where was recompense for the fate that had overtaken Slim Carter? For weeks all the boys thought that Slim was pining away toward death. He had not been married more than a week before the change in him was evident. He was pale. Pale unto death!

True, they found out afterward that there really was nothing the matter with Slim except that he was shaving every day—but where could be a worse fate than that? To shave every day! It was more than the price of happiness. In fact, there could be no happiness under such a handicap!

Women, he knew, were like that. Evelyn would have been just the same. After a hard day of riding she would expect him to wash his hands and face and comb his hair and fuss up for every meal. The chances were good, too, that she would say he smelled "horsey" and break up his friendship with Rags. That was another thing to consider. He and Rags could remain steadfast now. Come to think of it, where was there a woman who could love like Rags? If that horse could cook—

Then he sighed. The effort seemed to start at his heels, gain in volume like a rolling snowball, and burst forth upon the silence of the room like a bombshell.

"Fer Gawd sake!" came the resonant voice again. "Will you please muzzle that weepin' willow so's a gent can pound his ear?"

Spitefully Chet dropped both his boots to the floor. The resultant noise started a stream of profanity and a series of threats so dire in their nature that a less knowing rider might have trembled in awe.

"Go to hell, gents," Chet responded genially. "All of you—take your friends—stay as long as you like—the trip's on me!"

He dropped back into his blankets. He remained there but a fraction of a second, however. Then he sat erect and emitted a howl that brought screams of satisfied laughter.

"Who soaked my blankets?" Chet demanded after banging his head against the bunk above in his effort to free himself from the clammy thing he called his bed. "Who done it? That's goin' too far! I'll manhandle the pup that done that!"

"Shut up, yuh sneakin' Romeo," came the voice of Silent Pulver. "Nobody that has a heart dirty enough to use my razor for thuh parin' o' their toenails could lick a horned toad!"

Meekly, his heart laden to the breaking point, Chet went to the door. Outside the moon still shone, and it seemed to him that the face which had appeared on the silver surface was grinning ludicrously down upon him. It was queer, he decided, how rapidly and how completely a man's whole life could be shattered! He was an object of ridicule now, and all because of that girl.

Rags, sensing the presence of his master, came to the corral bars. Chet went to the animal, half expecting even Rags to whinny and run away from him. He gulped when the animal extended his nose for the caress. Just gulped, and Rags tossed his head as though he understood and was very, very sorry that he could do nothing about the matter.

Then Chet went to his saddle, got his poncho from the roll and spread it on the ground. His red flannels he forgot. He rolled into the rubber affair and his head rested near the lower corral bar. Inside the corral Rags, too, lay down. The head of the horse and that of the man remained very close together.

CHAPTER III.

FINALE.

THE moon had crept close to the horizon before sleep came to the heavy-hearted Chet. During those hours of wakefulness he had the added longing for a cigarette which he was unable to appease. His clothes he had left in the bunk house. His nerves reacted to all that he had been through that night. The life that opened before him seemed bleak and uninviting. It is hard to explain why we are here on earth, anyway, Chet decided.

When he stirred, tossed in his restlessness, the head of Rags just beyond the corral bar would rise too. The horse snorted a friendly greeting now and then, and but for that Chet would have been lost entirely to the clutch of morose discouragement. But sleep finally came. It is not possible to keep a vigorous, healthy, mightily muscled creature long from its rest.

Neither is it a simple matter to rouse

such a creature when it is plunged in the comforting arms of delayed slumber. The sun rose over the sleeping Chet next morning, and still he slept. The men of the bunk house rose, dressed, splashed joyously about in the cool water, then headed for breakfast while yet Chet slept peacefully, his head against the corral bar.

It was Rags who woke him. Knowing that this most unusual of all the unusual things which had happened since they started on that ride was wrong, Rags pawed, whinnied, and snorted his master to wakefulness. Chet stretched, sat up, sensed all that had taken place, and realized his position. He must get to the bunk house.

The boss would have little appreciation of a rider who wandered about in broad daylight in his red flannels. It was summer, and the red flannels were of a light knit, but they were flannels nevertheless, and they were very, very red. The problem was an acute one. Chet had a good two hundred feet to go in order to reach his clothes.

He rose and started. His appearance was greeted by such a howl of joyous derision that every one on the ranch rushed to see what was happening. Among the rushers was the boss and—horrors!—the boss's wife!

Jim Reynolds was a good boss. He had ranched for a good many years, and he knew the boys who rode for him. His wife, big, a little fat, always good-natured, and thoroughly beloved by every man within a thousand miles of the place, was as popular as the boss himself. One glance sufficed to show this couple that great things were afoot.

Red as the flannels were, the face of Chet, when he saw that Mrs. Reynolds was in sight, was redder. The poor lad cast discretion to the winds and lunged madly for the seclusion of the bunk house. His every stride was accompanied by violent cheering. Silent Pulver, just because he owned a razor, apparently took it upon himself to wreak greater havoc. He slid neatly inside the bunk house and slammed the door in Chet's face. Here was a true dilemma!

Chet pounded upon the door. He pleaded, he threatened, he wheedled, and cajoled. In return he got a lot of facts in connection with the treatment which should be accorded good razors.

"The red devil, hisself!" shouted one of the riders. "I calls your attention to this here free exhibit, gents! There ain't a ranch in the West offerin' the features we gives you right here. Where, I asks you gents, where in all the far-flung West can you git service like this afore breakfast?"

So the fun went on. For fully ten minutes these hard-hearted riders of the Reynolds outfit capitalized the predicament of one of their number. Then the boss, ever with an eye to control, suggested that he was paying them for work. They laughingly agreed that such was the case and Chet, humiliated, angered, desperate, was admitted to the bunk house.

"Hustle up now, lad," the boss called to him. "Throw some clothes over them passionate panties, and git out here to yore chow."

But the troubles of Chet seemed only to have begun. He found his boots well-filled with water. Every garment he had worn was knotted with the strength and vigor of the riders who had selected him for the target of their horseplay. True misery was this! Chet proceeded to dump his boots into the bunks of as many men as the boots would wet, then he set about untying his clothes. Breakfast was over when he appeared dressed.

But Mrs. Reynolds saved the day. "Come along, Chet," she smiled. "Folks as rough and crude as these ain't got any sense o' kindness whatsoever! You run along up to the house, and I'll see you git fed up plenty!"

In the presence of this fine lady whose dignity must have been outraged by the appearance of the "one and only red devil," Chet was deeply humiliated. However, an appetite is an appetite and a man cannot dodge forever! He followed the lady to the house and ate with the lusty vigor of his age, inclination, and station.

When he left the house the others had already assumed their duties for the day. Reynolds met him and told him that the

fence beyond the south corral was badly in need of repair. He better get down there with a wire stretcher and a few staples—it was old stuff. What was more ignominious to a real rider than this business of fence fixing?

But Chet did not complain. He went to the south corral and spent the day in the menial task allotted to him. What a miserable day that was! The barbs of the wire tore his fingers as the barbs of his memory tore at his heart.

This was no simple thing in the life of a man, he assured himself. It would be a very long time before he could uproot the love he had felt for Evelyn Fisher. And the boys seemed intent upon riding him to death just at the time he most needed solitude and a chance to fight the canker in his heart.

Near supper time he returned to the bunk house. About every blanket in the place had been hung out to dry, his own included. He was hopeful that a smile from him, a grin that showed all scores settled and no hard feelings, would quell the sudden upset that had made of him its vortex. But he asked too much. The boys of the Reynolds outfit had, it seemed, become possessed of "new evidence." They started on him at once.

They were not direct enough about it all to make him the target for personal remarks. Their nefarious designs shaped themselves in the form of innuendo. For instance, Silent Pulver said:

"Once I was in love, gents—don't laugh! I must tell you about this here deviation o' mine. She was a very lovely gal as you will imagine and me, with my ugly mug, couldn't see that all the world was just nac'hrilly achin' to kow-tow at the feet o' this dame!

"So I proposes marriage one night and when she laughs at me, and calls attention to my onhandsome map, I tosses myself off several libations and turns to face the world anew. But the world and me both had changed sudden and plenty! In order to show you gents how love can affect a man, I must refer to the bright red onderwear I used to buy in them days—"

"I'll buy you a new razor, Silent," Chet promised. "Only just have a heart and lay off a gent what ain't any too happy anyway, will you?"

"Now, conjure that, gents!" Silent gasped in well-feigned surprise. "I asts you—conjure that! You would think I was makin' personal reflections when I simply states in confessional tone one o' my own der'lictions! Chet, I reckon I'm plumb outraged at this here suspicion you shows!"

"Go ahead!" Chet groaned, "go ahead; you can't put the soul of a gent into a skunk, Silent. I should have expected less from you."

"I had bought me a new razor about that time," Silent persisted, "and they was a white-livered, ant-eatin' burro louse that rode in the same outfit with me, that stole my razor once. He used said razor for parin' up his toenails, that's what he done—"

"I did not!" Chet exploded. "Didn't I tell you I'd buy you a new razor? Can't you lay off'n me, Silent? The razor ain't worth a damn anyway!"

"So," Silent went on, "he bein' so onfeelin' a rat as to do that, I riles again' him plenty. In fack, and this here ain't to be quoted in publick, I makes up my mind I'll drill this salamander the first chance I gets at him.

"Imagine my feelin's, gents, when I discovers that this same leapin' Lothario has stole the gal as well! Yes, sirree! He has followed me onto her front porch and, while the gay moon is shinin' upon my heart agony, this gent proposes to thuh gal and walks off with her love and affection tuh say nothin' of her love, honor, and obedience, mebbe!

"I'm opset plenty, gents. Fit to be tied, I am, me not likin' this gent any too much anyhow!

"To add to these here already enumerated troubles o' mine, the gal tells this husband-to-be of hers, just what I has says in my proposal. She tells him I sat there and mooned at her and told her that, even if my hair was red—I mean brown—and my face covered with freckles, I has a heart—"

Chet could stand no more. It suddenly

dawned upon him, that in addition to laughing at the love he had offered Evelyn, the girl had deliberately told the things he had said in professing that love. He seemed to lose all sense of humiliation or control. Before the various men gathered about the place he spoke his mind.

"Shut up, Silent!" he ordered. "Your mouth is too big. Ever since I've knowed you you have talked too much. You're barkin' up the wrong tree right now! Better learn to keep quiet once in your life!"

Silent grinned a little foolishly. He was in that trying position where a man has, obviously, a lot more to say, but where he hesitates, suddenly, to say it.

"No hard feelin', Chet," he grumbled.

"Hard feelin' be damned! I admit I asked a gal to marry me. Looks like I guessed wrong on 'er altogether! She turned me down, sure she did! Who could blame her much? But that ain't no reason for a lot o' hamstrung cow-punchers to be shootin' off their faces, Silent. You better lay off!"

"Chet's right, boys," Reynolds offered from the door. "There ain't anything funny about proposin' to a gal and gettin' turned down! I proposed to my wife, didn't I? If she had said no—well, let's drop this line o' talk. I'm right sorry that Chet didn't connect, and I don't see anything funny in this!"

"Me, neither," Chet avowed. "She had a right to turn me down, but she didn't have a right to tell all I said—and to laugh at the best I had to offer her!"

"Are you criticizin' Evelyn Fisher?" one of the others demanded.

"Course I am," Chet snapped. "A blind man could see she's been tellin' things! Course I criticize her!"

"Well, lay off," the other responded. "I don't mind tellin' you that the gal has promised to marry me!"

Chet looked at the winner in amazement. It was hard for him to believe that the words could be true. He had known the other rider for the months the man had been employed by Reynolds. He had known, too, that the man had shown attention to Evelyn Fisher.

But it had never occurred to him that the matter might have reached the point this fellow now announced. Something of vengeance inspired Chet. His feelings, outraged by the series of events that had made him the butt of jokes by his friends, inspired him:

"Yeah? She's promised to marry you, huh? Well, that's fine. She's a nice gal, Evelyn. After you're married she'll be callin' in the neighbors and tellin' them everything you say or do!"

"Easy now," Reynolds interposed. "All o' you lads is steamed up to where you're apt to say things you don't mean—"

"I mean that, awright!" Chet avowed vehemently. "I says this gent is sure playin' in luck when he catches a gal that'll tell what a man says when he's tellin' her that he loves her! But I ain't sayin' the kind o' luck he's playin' in!"

"Sorehead!" the winner of Evelyn snarled. "Just plain sorehead! I ain't goin' to take you up on what you say, because you're just plain sour grapes, that's all!"

"The taste'll last a darn sight longer with you than it did with me, friend," Chet assured the man. "You're goin' to git the gal!"

"Go ahead—be a yellow loser, Chet," the man grinned. "Ain't there any message you'd like to have me give this gal from you?"

Chet pondered a moment. Then he made answer:

"Yeah, there's a message. Tell her I send her this!" Without further words he clenched his fist and drove it against the chin of the other. The man collapsed without a sound. Chet turned to the others.

"Anybody resent that?" he demanded. "I'm here now to answer for what I done! Pretty soon I won't be. Better git me while I'm here, gents!"

"I reckon we was only kiddin' a bit, Chet," Silent Pulver said.

"Kiddin' too damn much for me, Silent," Chet snapped. "If this walrus ain't got a friend in the crowd I reckon I'll be rollin' along! Reynolds—if it's all the same to you I guess I'll be takin' any money I got comin', and quittin'! Is that awright?"

"I reckon you'll all be coolin' off right quick, Chet," the rancher suggested. "I'd hate to see you go—but you sure can have your money—"

"I'll be takin' it, Reynolds. This here place ain't no place for me—you know that!"

Reynolds nodded sorrowfully, and the two set off for the ranch house where the accounts between them could be settled. Within half an hour Chet had packed his duffel and saddled Rags. Reynolds was at the corral to extend the hand of friendship and a wish of good luck.

"Red heads are bad medicine, Chet," he said, slowly. "I know the breed pretty well. You ain't got any idee where you're goin', have you?"

"I reckon I'll hit for Vilend, Reynolds. Folks says that a man has got a great chance there."

"The Eastern money interests is building up the place," Reynolds agreed. "But better keep that temper o' yours in check, Chet."

"There's been enough to lose it, Reynolds," Chet said. "I ain't easy riled."

"You're as good a lad as we ever had ridin' this place, Chet. Good luck to you!"

Then Chet rode away. Under that thatch of red hair that adorned the head of him there was not the faintest idea of what would happen to him. He knew only that he would ride to Vilend, the town near the border where, rumor had it, opportunity existed for the man with the stuff to beat the game!

In his pocket, in fact, to his name, he had in all the world but forty silver dollars!

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER WANDERER.

"THERE ain't a bit of sense in hurryin', Rags," Chet told his mount as the ranch at which he had worked slipped into the distance behind them. "When a fellow ain't headin' anywhere except a town, and when he don't know what he's goin' to do when he gets there, where does the sense o' hurry come in?"

They plodded across the plains, Chet turning the brim of his sombrero lower as the rays of the warm sun became more direct. At noon they camped long enough to build a fire for the noonday meal, and to allow Rags to roll and drink his fill from the river they followed. Chet smoked his cigarette with a strange relish.

There is something of fascination in the knowledge that one is absolutely free. Even though the outlook is uncertain, it does not hinder that ecstasy of emotion which tells a man that there is no commanding whistle whose shrill voice may summon him to labor.

Something of that ecstasy gripped Chet now. Back at the ranch there were fences to be repaired, wagons and harness to be put into working condition, and, later, there would be the frenzied days of the round-up, the branding, the cutting in and out that wears horse and man to the very precipice of exhaustion and unleashed temper. Of none of these things need he worry now.

"I should have tore loose from that place a long time ago, Rags," he soliloquized, when again they were plodding over the dusty ground. "Reynolds is a fine fellow and for a job, that was as good as any, but what does a fellow get out of it? For a long time to come I don't want any home! I don't want to be pegged at any partic'ler place. I'm goin' to see the world, somehow. I reckon I'll work a spell in one place, then kick along to another.

"Even if Vilend is all they say about it, I ain't goin' to stay there long! They said the passin' o' the railroad through Squirrel Gulch was goin' to make a city there most as big as New York—but the railroad has run through there four years already and there's still a big difference in the size o' the towns! I don't think railroads is half as much as they make 'em out to be, Rags! Of course, Squirrel Gulch has got a lot more room to grow than New York has—but it ain't even started up, yet!"

"I'll take a look at Vilend. That can't hurt anything. The things they tell about it is pretty hot stuff! Gamblin' hells runnin' wide open, more saloons than houses, dancin' girls, gamblers, gunfighters!—gee, hoss, giddap!"

During mid afternoon, when the heat

was at its worst, they found shelter in an arroyo and Chet indulged in a swim and a luxurious repose under the shade of a cottonwood. When they again started forward the going was easier for the rest and the fact that the sun's rays had lost much of their potency.

It was just before dark that Chet began to pick up from the plains evidences that they were nearing a town, or large ranch of some kind. Here and there were the ruts of wagon wheels. Many horses had passed over the ground all going in the same direction.

" I reckon that'll be Powder Gap, Rags," the rider announced. " 'Sfunny—here I been within a day's ride o' this place for three years and ain't never seen it! It shows that a man can't afford to let hisself get so habituated! Freedom like this is what a gent needs! The railroad runs through this here town, too. I aim to stand steady by them tracks when that overland rattles past. I don't wanna miss seein' that, hoss. And when you see it—wow! There won't be no holdin' you, Rags!"

There was a very definite excitement about Chet's first glimpse of the lights of the little town. In the back of his mind he knew that at Powder Gap he had struck the main stem to the border. All he need do was follow the tracks of the railroad as far as they went, and then keep going due southwest and he would reach Vilend.

Every one knew that the railroad was being extended to Vilend in order to open to ranching the vast reaches of that territory near the border. Vilend had been decided upon as the funnel, so to speak, through which the beef supply of the Southwest could be poured into the hungry mouths of the cultured East.

True, there had been railroads in the country for years and years, but this construction now being prosecuted harked back, after a fashion, to the olden days when the first ribbons of steel to be laid into those vast deserts had furnished a metal carpet over which thundered thousands of head of cattle. That had been the first step in the conquering of a land naked in its robust realism and mighty in its ability to serve mankind.

This Vilend affair represented the second forward step in the conquering of both the land and the industry upon which it had thrived. Instead of shipping bellowing cattle over the steel ribbons of progress, the great financiers of the East were planning to build a different sort of car and ship the beef dressed.

Therein lay the attraction to Vilend. There would be erected abbatoirs, tanneries, dressing stations. Huge numbers of men would find lucrative employment in this new world of work. Buildings would distort the silent horizon; merchants would prosper, and homes for the workers would rise like magic. Land that had lain for centuries untrammeled would suddenly be sought after by men who controlled the strings of endless money bags.

And it was toward this haven of the fortune-seeker that Chet rode, all unknowing. His forty silver dollars felt heavy in the money belt he wore.

Something of that which awaited him inspired excitement in his mind. Despite the ache of his heart and the thrum of humiliation in his ears, he sang a song as the shadows of darkness peeped across the eastern horizon.

" Rags," he said, in a voice that seemed forced to calm, " before us lies the same world that Columbus discovered—it was Columbus discovered the world wasn't it? —and you and me is goin' to conquer the same as snappy as he did himself!

" I was thinkin' a minute ago I'd ride into this Powder Gap place, and order me a steak and spuds, to say nothin' of a pewter jug o' the cup that cheers. Second thought tells me I ain't goin' to do either! I reckon me havin' the glorious sum o' very slightly more than thirty-nine bucks, I better avoid this second rate joint and save the celebration for Vilend."

So, as darkness enhanced the gleam of the town's lights but a short distance away, Chet selected a spot near the high bank of the railroad track, and there built himself a fire and set to cooking savory bacon and mixing himself a batter that shortly would be biscuits. The art was an old one to him, and he worked with an efficiency that was indisputably the gift of long experience.

Rags, as was his custom, remained close at hand watching the process with an interested eye. Just as Chet was about to eat the food of his own cooking there came an interruption. Down the steep bank of the track came a man. Pebbles and cinders rolled beneath his feet, his breath came in puffs that denoted a puffy obesity not born on the wings of labor.

Chet laid hand to his gun and turned to meet the newcomer. There was no need for the weapon, that was evident at a glance. For the wanderer who came upon them was so obviously that which he was, that by no stretch of the imagination could he be suspected of being anything else. He was a tramp, a glorious tramp.

His clothes were a motley array of colors and patches. His soft hat, assuredly the discard of a cowboy, was too large, and there was a hole in the crown of it through which seeped some of the man's long hair.

A huge safety pin, fastened exactly on the broad stomach of the man impressed one as the central bolt in the suspension system by which the pudgy figure was held within the clothes that draped it. His beard was fully half an inch long, his upper teeth were conspicuous by their absence, his hands were grimy with the stress of precarious travel.

"Stranger," he cried, while yet some ten feet away from Chet, "by the ancient and honorable ancestral line from which I spring, there never was bacon that smelled like that bacon before! I been smellin' it for quarter of a mile!

"I ask you to look upon one high in his profession, but who suffers plenty from the momentary discomfort of hunger. Surely, as fine lookin' and as prosperous a gent as you are is not goin' to send me on my way unfed after tearin' my nostrils raw with whiffs of this divine chow!"

"If it's grub you want, sit down," Chet answered. "Where I come from any man is welcome to that."

"That, my dear fellow, is the spot for which I have been huntin' for near ten years! Where do you come from?"

"Up north a ways," Chet grinned.

The tramp dropped to his haunches and reached his grimy fingers for slices of the crisp bacon. He shook his fingers from contact with the hot strips, then, tipping his head back, he opened his cavernous mouth, and Chet gasped at the manner in which the fellow ate.

A ravenous appetite indeed was his! The mouth would open, snap shut, munch twice, then the head would come back to level as the hairy Adam's apple bobbed, and the hand would stretch forth for more bacon. Biscuits disappeared in the same manner.

"Beat it over to the stream and fill this tin, stranger," Chet ordered finally. "I'll make a few more of them biscuits, and we'll need a flock of coffee if you're goin' to keep that pace up."

The tramp rose with the tin and fled for the river. Here indeed was a strike for a hungry man!

Chet watched in amazement as the man ate his fill. He knew what it was to ride all day without food; he had seen others eat after similar effort, but never had he seen a man eat as this ragged stranger did. When finally the tramp leaned back and coughed forth a sigh of satiation, Chet grinned appreciatively.

"I reckon, stranger, if that's your normal gait, no one man livin' could earn enough to feed you!"

"There was a time, my friend, when I was able to do it," the tramp responded. "You see, food alone is not my appetite. I have a weakness for the brimming cup, plural sense."

"A boozer, huh?"

"Alas—no more! Fate has been unkind to me! I drank enough to rouse the ire of —friends—then away went my earning capacity and in came more hard luck. It is the sort of thing a man does not talk about. However, what can I do to thank you? Ah!"

The exclamation came as Chet drew forth his smoking material. "Verily, friend, you serve a banquet. My fingers are not deft, but I ask you to roll me a pill and let me settle this glorious repast with the soothing aroma of an unused smoke. Most of those which have come my way of late have been abused by some previous owner who was careless of the speed at which he burned the fragrant weed."

Chet, grinning broadly now, rolled a smoke and handed it to the man. Somehow he liked the tramp. The very audacity of the man was refreshing, and Chet had never heard such a flow of words as seeped through the unkempt beard of the fellow. There was a never-ending twinkle in the bright eyes of him, too, that attracted Chet. He was so frank in the confession of his weaknesses that one felt impelled to tolerate his admitted waywardness.

"You sure got a line o' talk, stranger," Chet suggested.

"Ain't I, though? If you but know the large sums spent in the acquisition of my learning and oratorical splendor, you might understand how nearly perfect I am. I am proud of my English, friend. Proud of it! It is the remaining vestige of a once promising character in the world of affairs."

"You ain't no Westerner," Chet adjudged.

"Alas! Therein lies the one weakness of an otherwise perfect past. I was born in the East. However, do not hold it against me, friend. You who are born of the crucible can take credit only for having remained a Westerner. I, born in the stifled atmosphere of the East, showed the judgment and the natural longing that made a Westerner of me. Get the thought? You are a Westerner by chance and the dictates of Omnipotence. I by choice. Which is the better Westerner?"

"You win, I reckon."

"The thought is worthy expression at least!" At this juncture the tramp inhaled deeply of his smoke, and raised his head to emit the white cloud upon the silent night. As he did so he noticed Rags for the first time.

"A horse! A pretty horse, too! Black but for the forehead and feet, eh? Yours?"

"Tell the gent yes, Rags," Chet ordered. Rags pawed his hoof once.

The look of surprise upon the unshaven face was so intense that Chet laughed aloud.

"Do you believe all this gent tells us, Rags?" he insisted. "Say no."

Two paws of the hoof.

"My God! Has the animal the power of understanding?"

"Stranger, this here hoss has more sense than most folks! He's eddicated plumb scand'lous. He adds, subtracts, mult'plies, and divides like a schoolmarm. Come close, Rags. Up here near the fire where we can be chummy."

Rags drew near, held forth his muzzle for the unvarying caress.

"Now, Rags, this here gent has been boastin' about his eddication. Do you think he knows as much as you do? Answer me."

Chet shook his head slowly from one side to the other, and Rags proceeded to imitate him perfectly. The eyes of the tramp, popping from his head at this unusual affair, remained trained upon the animal and thus lost the motion of Chet's head.

"Good!" Chet continued. "Neither do I. Shall we show him up plenty, Rags?" Thereupon Chet nodded a yes, and the horse once more imitated beautifully. The tramp gasped, rose awkwardly to his feet, and bowed before the animal. His tattered hat he removed with a sweeping gesture.

"I pay homage!" he cried. "Once before I saw pink lizards with green wings and purple tails. They were flying across the heavens in droves, and each of my friends wore one in his buttonhole. Am I in the same condition again, or is this splendid creature about to take human form?"

Here he reached into the manifold wrinkles of his garments and drew forth a black bottle of flask size and shape. He fumbled a moment with the cork, then poured some of the contents into the tin cup Chet carried. This he offered Chet, and seemed highly offended when his new friend declined.

However, with a shrug of his fat shoulders, he tossed off the potion and finished the operation with a loud smack. After running the back of his hand over his lips and restoring both cork and bottle to their respective places, he turned again to the horse.

Chet had begun to get enormous enjoyment from the affair.

"Rags," he grinned, "we won't bother with no algebra nor nothin' like that. It's too late, and we had a hard day, anyhow. But this shorthorn was speakin' of learn-

in', and I figgered I might ask you how much is three and three?"

Rags, head cocked attentively and eyes trained upon his master's hand, caught the imperceptible moves of Chet and nodded his head ponderously six times.

"And now, Rags, s'posin' we take away about two of that six, then add one more and divide what's left in half—how many's that?"

Following the lead set by Chet, Rags shook his head negatively.

"What'samatter?" Chet asked. "Can't you do that to-night? Let's see now! Oh, by golly, Rags, you're right! That 'd make two and a half, and you ain't learned to write fractions yet. Well, let's—"

"Friend," the tramp cried suddenly, "God has restored the world upon a new basis! If that horse had answered that, he'd have convinced me that I really saw the lizards, too! You and me has got to talk for a spell."

Chet let Rags find a comfortable spot near by where the pony could lie for the night. Then the two men settled themselves by the fire, and the tramp proceeded to ask many questions. The sum total of his queries, and Chet was amazed at the deft manner in which this strange man made him talk, was that Chet had told about all his story.

"Just wanderin', eh? A good deal like me, I imagine! And you say you are seeking work? Friend, that is terrible! It is not work you seek! No job must lure you from the great duty I am about to point out to you! In one hour, friend, shekels for which you might labor a month can be garnered from the free and open palms of astounded spectators—"

"Whatcha gassin' about, stranger? The stuff in that bottle sure has started you runnin' wild!"

"Ah—glad you reminded me!" With tremendous audacity the tramp withdrew the bottle and imbibed again. "It is my weakness, friend. Drink! But for drink—ah, well! However, you can see that I forsake the glory of food for the stimulation of drink. Though I may be hungry, I seldom am thirsty. But I must enlarge upon the thought I expressed a moment ago.

"I reiterate—you do not seek a job. Not with a horse like that! All that you need is a man of vision and originality to precede you into towns. Such a man, friend, can make you and himself rich. I am that man!"

"You mean—"

"I mean that to-morrow morning I shall enter yonder town of Powder Gap proclaiming the advent of the world's greatest horse. I shall find me a suitable place of prominence, and from that place shall advise the citizens of that flaming metropolis just what is in store for them. Shortly after that you shall appear and converse with this phenomenal creature you call Rags. Money shall leap to our fingers like steel to the clutch of the magnet, young man!"

"You're loco!" Chet pronounced inelo-quently.

"Which has nothing whatsoever to do with the horse, my proposal, or the fact that you are not intelligent enough to realize that we face a business opportunity of rare possibilities.

"You have said that I am a talker. Think of what there is to be said about this magnificent beast of yours! My words and his deeds shall fill our pockets. By the time I have done with my advance notices the town of Powder Gap shall be awaiting your appearance with open arms—and money pokes, young man."

As the ragged stranger enlarged upon his plan some of its possibilities impressed Chet. After all, was he not free? Was not all the time in the world his own? Would not this be a rare and easy livelihood? The spirit of adventure gripped Chet, too. Think of Rags and himself performing before the people of different towns—"

"Had you but the intelligence God has given the horse," the stranger was saying, "this task of mine would be simple indeed!"

"Stranger, I'll go you!" Chet announced impulsively. "There ain't a thing to be lost, and there might be something gained. I'll try anything once!"

"Whoops! And then again, whoops!" shouted the tramp. "The dawn of a new day shall bring with it my first crack at

silver money in years! You will bless my name before another sun sets, friend."

"By the way—what is this here name of yours?"

"You may have heard it; you may not. That is of little consequence. Out here, what's a name? I shall not bother to give you the name under which I began life. But the one by which I am now known among the fraternity is Wanderin' Willis of Wilmington. Like the horse, the name has possibilities in connection with our new venture."

CHAPTER V.

THE PERFORMANCE AT POWDER GAP.

THE enthusiastic tramp was up at the first crack of dawn. He made his case quite clear to Chet as the latter prepared the breakfast. Rags must be looking at his best. Chet himself must spruce up to the *n*th degree, though the purple shirt and green neckerchief, by light of day, were affairs apt to attract attention!

As for Willis himself, he would see what could be done at the near-by stream; but a shave was of vital importance and any barber would ask a dollar! Could Chet repose confidence enough in the man himself and the merit of his project, to advance said amount?

Chet relinquished the dollar and agreed to wait until about ten o'clock before riding into the town.

"Remember, Chet, you simply ride into the main street of this blot on the landscape, and keep peekin' around until you catch a glimpse of me. Then ride to me and leave the rest entirely in my hands. Plan out your act as well as you can, and do the easy stuff first, and that figgerin' last—understand?"

As Chet cleaned the breakast dishes he watched Willis, washed to a shiny cleanliness now, stride off in the direction of the town.

"Wonder if he went to all that trouble just to talk a silver dollar outa me!" he mused.

But, at the appointed time, he saddled Rags and they set out for the center of the little town. Chet had to pass through the place anyway and, if he saw nothing of Willis when he got there, it would be a simple matter to keep going toward Vilend and make no mention of having met the tramp. The talk of the man had been worth more than the dollar anyway!

Powder Gap was one of many towns of the same ilk. In the construction of the railroad it had been necessary to make use of a large traveling crew of workers. These men had been housed in camps along the right of way, and every camp soon became the "picking grounds" of various gamblers, liquor agents, and sharpers.

Which of the camps were to remain in existence under the glorified name of "town" had become merely a matter of mileage. There were enough ranchers and cowboys in a given area to support a trading post.

Powder Gap was such a relic of the old camp days. Its location preserved it after the construction gangs had passed on with the clatter of their implements and the appetites of their leisure hours.

The place boasted three or four saloons, two large dance and gambling halls, which were run quite openly despite the law against them, several stores of unpretentious dimensions, and possibly forty or fifty houses and a restaurant. It thrived upon the riotous support of cowboy celebrants who willingly came to its emporiums and squandered their earnings. It has been said of Powder Gap that it was neither bad nor good, "just border."

Into the street which ran between the business buildings Chet rode. About halfway through the town his skepticism anent the purpose of Willis was completely dissipated; for Willis himself darted into the dust of the street. His tattered hat waved violently, his voice—Chet had noted a mellow tone to it—called frantically to all assembled in one of the large dance halls.

Men stepped onto the porch of the place, looked in the direction of Chet, then assumed positions from whence they could view all that developed. Chet reined in when he had reached Willis and looked down into the face of the man. He had been shaved and there was a quality about

the face thus disclosed which Chet liked immediately and immensely.

"Gents!" Willis cried as he rested a hand upon the bridle of Rags, "this here is the magnificent team of man and horse about which I told you a brief moment agone! Here they are. You are now privileged to look upon the only horse alive with the brain of a man! It will be our pleasure to show you gents that the ways of the Creator are inscrutable!

"As you stand spellbound before him, this gentle, yet powerful steed of the open spaces will perform for you feats of brain power such as your wildest dreams could paint but futilely! I ask that each of you realize the stroke of good fortune which has come unto you. Were it not that Rags, the Extraordinary, Educated Equine, is on his way to the new town of Vilend, where thousands may gaze upon his phenomenal powers, you would never have seen him!

"It is your good luck. I am a greatly traveled man and have seen many towns. But never before have I found a town that screamed civic pride more than this very metropolis of Powder Gap! Well may you be proud of this spirit! And well do I know that, after witnessing this marvelous demonstration, you will accord its performers a liberal compensation that they may become messengers carrying the spirit of Powder Gap to the neighboring towns!

"I am about to turn the ceremonies over to the famous Chet Mills, owner and educator of the wonder horse, Rags!"

The effort of his speech had brought the perspiration to the ruddy cheeks of Willis. He ran his hand over his forehead, shook it for all to see as an evidence of his earnestness and labor, then made a sweeping bow toward Chet and Rags. With the street cleared before them, Chet tightened the rein on Rags, and swayed a little in the seat. Very quickly the horse caught the rhythm thus transmitted, and the audience grinned appreciation as his forefeet began a dance that kept perfect time.

First one would rise, bend, straighten, then land stiff while the other rose to repeat the performance. In company with these moves Rags waved his head from side to side and snorted his joy.

One of the men on the dance hall porch shifted a quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other, spat voluminously into the dust of the street, then remarked: "He done that damned good!"

Chet slid from the saddle and waved a hand to the men. Then he drew his revolver and fired a shot into the ground. Immediately the shot sounded he staggered some feet away as though he might have been wounded. At once Rags, his eyes showing the joy he got from these performances, walked to his side—for Chet fell prone—and rolled the inert body onto its side. The horse used his head for the purpose and was extremely gentle.

Then he worked the canteen that Chet had strapped onto his belt, free. Thus it was possible to get water for the wounded man. That done, Rags went back and pawed the dropped revolver through the dirt until it lay at Chet's hand. Then the horse lay down at his master's side as though he might be shielding him with his own body.

The performance struck home with the men. They were all plainsmen. When Chet leaped to his feet he laughed boyishly at the honor done Rags. These tricks were all things which he had taught the pony during their endless days on the range. Chet had never before realized that they were unusual.

"Damme!" avowed the tobacco-chewer then. "This here critter has a heap o' sense, I'm sayin'!"

"Gents—you ain't seen nothin', yet!" Willis shouted from his place at the side of the street. "This animal has a brain that is well-nigh Websterian! He thinks; he reasons; he adds, subtracts, multiplies, and divides—"

"Come off that stuff!" one of the men decried. "He's a tricky and pretty little cuss we'll admit that—but never mind that addin' and subtractin'—"

"We now come to the meat of the matter!" Willis announced. "Already you have seen enough of this great beast to know that you have seen the least of the things he does. Will you permit him to pass through this great town without knowing all that he does? Must it be said of

Powder Gap that folks let this marvelous creature go by their very noses without appreciating him?

"It is not that we are not trustful of your generosity, my friends, that I bring up this point. Never mind that! It is merely that, as a business man who appears in the garb of a tramp in order to catch the attention of strangers, I am forced to revert to the principles of business procedure!

"This great horse eats. His rider eats also. I, too, must eat. And eating takes money—"

The man who had spoken first calmly tossed a silver dollar into the dust at Willis's feet. Others quickly followed suit. Willis scrambled after them until the perspiration ran anew down his puffy cheeks, and his fat fingers became caked with dust.

By this time a crowd had gathered. Willis was delighted with the progress of affairs. Chet, scarcely realizing what to expect next, but ineffably proud of Rags and anxious to show him off, let the tramp run matters to his own satisfaction.

"You shall see that a horse can add, subtract, multiply, and divide," Willis declared. "In order that this great spectacle may be enjoyed by all, I am going to ask that the newcomers form a circle, and that a chair be brought into the street so that Chet can seat himself and give you a hint of what it means to have a horse attend school!"

The chair was quickly brought. Chet seated himself as the others gathered about. Rags did not fail him.

"Rags, do you like this town?" Chet queried, catching his cue from Willis.

To the utter amazement of the citizens assembled, the horse nodded his head affirmatively.

"Oh, come, come, now!" Chet challenged. "That was just a nod. Answer me right out; say yes!" Rags pawed once, and the spectators guffawed their delight. The horse liked Powder Gap!

"See anybody in the crowd you don't like, Rags?" There came a negative shake of the head which none seemed to realize was but an imitation of Chet's own motions. There was another roar of laughter.

"Better look again, Rags—be sure!" Again the negative shake. "This is a right fine town, then—you ain't usually so satisfied! Look good now, and if you really mean no, don't just shake your head—say no!" Rags pawed twice and the population of Powder Gap was won unalterably.

Chet tilted his chair back and moved his hands until he was sure that Rags's attention was focused upon them. The horse knew about what to expect, Chet thought. He loved to perform as much as Chet loved to have him. There was always that caress and a little sugar to be had following these affairs.

"Now, Rags," Chet went on when satisfied that the horse was ready for his signals, "when I came in here I saw four men on that porch. They was all right fine-lookin' fellows, but some of 'em needed to be shaved up a bit—did you notice how many of 'em was careless thataway? How many was there?"

Rags pawed twice. The crowd shouted in high glee and Willis was obviously in seventh heaven.

"S'posin' both of them fellows was to go right now to the barber—how many would be left of the four?" Rags pawed twice.

"Gawd'l'mighty!" gasped the man with the tobacco.

"And s'posin' one of them went home from there and one of 'em came right back here, Rags, how many would be here then?" Rags answered correctly with three paws of the hoof.

"And now, folks—" Willis proclaimed again, "you have seen that all I said was true! I have here the small sum of nineteen dollars from folks what have looked upon the greatest—" He paused to snatch a coin in mid-air and for the next few minutes was again busy groveling in the dust of the road.

His prognostications had come true. People were happy enough to pay generously to look upon the feats of this great horse! Chet and Willis seemed to have formed an unbeatable combination for money-making.

The performance went on for an hour or more. People who had deserted their duty to see the horse were compelled to hasten

away, but on their return to the prosaic they told others of what was happening and those others were constantly appearing in the circle to witness the phenomena. These Willis promptly and shamelessly approached for money.

At regular intervals he would turn his takings over to Chet who, in turn, would show them to Rags and ask the horse whether or not they were sufficient. Each time the answer was no, and the crowd roared with delight.

But there is an end to everything. The coins of the crowd became smaller and appeared with decreasing frequency. Then it was that Chet asked Rags if he cared to perform any more in the heat of the day, and the horse assured them all that he did not. Thus the show ended. It had netted the two schemers nearly sixty dollars.

The proprietor of the saloon and dance hall, sensing a chance for increased business, came forward with an offer of fifty dollars cash if the horse would perform in his place that evening. The offer, seemingly a golden chance, proved to be anything but that. It aroused the ire of the owner of the competing place and that chisel-faced individual burst through the circle of people and laid violent hands upon the neck of Wandering Willis of Wilmington.

"I just thought I'd see how far your nerve would carry you, you crummy rat!" he shouted. "Think you could get away with anything as raw as this? Think I'm a sucker, do ye?"

He raised his heavy hand and struck the squirming Willis twice. The tramp cried out at the first blow, for he was not the sort of man who stands up under physical punishment. The second silenced him entirely. Her cherubic face went white under the blow and his knees rattled queerly. The bigger man released his grip on the tattered coat, and the figure of Willis seemed to collapse within itself as it fell to the dust.

"Damned bum!" the man sputtered. "Damned thief! What kinda fools does he take us fer—"

It had all happened so quickly that Willis was prone and silent before Chet could make a move. But he did not delay action long. Something about the make-up of Willis had roused within him a sudden affection. The charm of this wayward and soiled traveler lay in his very irresponsibility and in his nimble wit and tongue.

Chet leaped to his feet so quickly that the borrowed chair clattered to the street behind him.

"What the hell!" he cried. "What d'ye mean by hittin' that poor fellow like that?"

The man who had caused the trouble whirled upon him. "I got no dealin's with you, young fellow!" he snapped. "And what's more I don't want none! You just keep to your own hoss and tricks, and don't be borin' in where you ain't able to hold up your end!

"This tramp partner o' yours is a common crook! I hired him yestiddy to clean up my place. All he done was to steal two bottles o' red liquor and run away! Now he's got the nerve to come back here with his same line o' talk—"

"You're goin' to pay for hittin' him thataway, stranger," Chet informed the man, calmly. "You called him my pard—I reckon he is! And folks don't treat any pard o' mine thataway—"

The man, seeing the gleam in Chet's eyes and the set of his chin, reached suddenly for his coat tails. That sign was enough for Chet. The young man leaped forward, caught the fellow's wrist in his fingers, and twisted it until the man sank to his knees with a groan of pain and a curse.

Standing over him, Chet told him to leave Willis alone as long as they remained in town, and to shut his mouth about any whisky that the tramp might have stolen.

"Don't be reachin' for guns, either, stranger! It ain't healthy for a skunk like you!"

He cast the man from him and grinned sourly as the figure sprawled into the dust at his feet; then rose and stalked through the circle of spectators toward the place he owned.

"Come inside, young fellow, and talk over my proposition before we gets interrupted any more," the owner of the dance hall suggested. Willis was on his feet now. His smile circled his lips, but it was clear that he was weak and unsteady. Chet

heard him accept an invitation to drink, and then suffered himself to be led away by the proprietor.

When finally he had agreed to show his pony that night the price had been increased to a hundred dollars payable in advance. Chet took half the money then, and agreed to accept the other half when the performance began. Then he turned to look for Willis.

Standing just behind him was the man he had thrown into the dirt for having struck his new partner. There was a sneer on his face. At his side stood the sheriff of Powder Gap.

"My name's Graff, stranger," said the one with whom Chet had quarreled. "It's a name that's fair known along this line—you plucked the wrong number to be gettin' rough with. All that we can settle later on—"

"Any time at all, Graff," Chet shrugged. "You riled me plenty when you tackled poor old Willis—he can't fight!"

"He can't now," the man leered. "The sheriff here has shut him up where he belongs. If you want to see him he's in the jail!" With these words the man turned and walked out of the place.

CHAPTER VI.

ON TO VILEND.

CHET turned to the sheriff, a look of inquiry on his face. The man answered the unspoken query:

"Yep. He's in all right, friend! I don't exackly like the idee o' lockin' up a harmless old bum like him—but what am I goin' to do? The complaint was swore out, and the judge give it to me to arrest this man and hold him fer court."

"What's he in for, sheriff?"

"Stealin'. He swiped some o' Steve Graff's liquor."

"So that's it, huh? Well—s'posin' he swears out a complaint against this Graff skunk fer knockin' him down, what then?"

"We'd take Graff in shore as shootin', friend. He ain't any too well liked around this town. But the tramp won't do that."

"Why not?"

"Well, he's a heap wiser'n he looks, if you asks me! He says that if Graff is took in for knockin' him down, then you'll have to be took for knockin' Graff down and that'd put you both in jail and leave you without no help at all. He's about right, too. Graff knows if he swears out a complaint ag'in' you, he'll go in himself; and the tramp won't swear out a complaint ag'in' him for fear you'll go in—see?"

"Who's the judge, sheriff?"

"Rem Tate—he runs the store across the street. Rem ain't a bad sort. Run over and see him—that's some hoss you got outside!"

Chet left the place, and crossed the street. Over the entrance to a store was the name Tate, and into that place he went. He found the judge to be typical of the plainsman. He had a sound sense of justice and a desire to see it done. His respect for the law was a thing glorious, considering the fact that men still carried guns and not infrequently used them!

"Law is law, stranger," he announced, in response to Chet's urging that charges against Willis be dropped. "Don't gather the idee you ain't a goin' to get a fair shake just 'cause you're a stranger here. You are. As long as I'm judge o' this town folks is goin' to get just what the law should give 'em!"

In spite of everything that Chet could say the man remained adamant. Court would be held in the morning and he would announce his sentence after hearing the evidence in the usual manner. There was nothing that could be done to influence him.

From the store Chet went to the jail and talked with Willis. He told the man just how things stood, and said that he would have to remain in jail that night, and face trial in the morning.

"My friend," Willis assured him, "'tis better so! The call of red liquor might come upon me during the first flush of our success. That would be bad. All my troubles come from liquor! I frankly admit that I did steal this man's liquor—but I'll just make him prove it in court!

"However, enough of that! Was I right? Have we a fortune at our finger tips? Can

you imagine how the people of a town like Vilend will toss their riches at our feet? This is not the first night I have spent in jail. Let it not concern you, Chet! Go to the dance place and gather in this hundred dollars.

"To-morrow, for the law cannot do more, under the statutes, than present me with five days for petty larceny for first offense."

"How do you know this?"

"I know—let that settle it. And also, the chances are many in my favor that I shall receive but a moderate fine—I know the law, Chet—I know the law—let me speak—go get this money and I have a hunch that a moderate fine will see us free again and ready to consider ways and means for future operations before noon of the coming day.

"However—and please, friend of our new success, do not fail me in this! Go to the restaurant and have them send me here a steak such as never was cooked before, some spuds that sizzled in juice of raw meat as they cooked, a large flock of—"

"I reckon you ain't sufferin' any, Willis," Chet grunted, in satisfaction. "I'll send you the grub and see you to-morrow in court."

From the jail Chet went back to the dance hall before which he had tied Rags. He located a stable where the animal could be given a feed of oats, and arranged that this be done. Also a comfortable stall in the shade was engaged. Rags had suddenly become a character, a thing of huge intrinsic value.

After making these arrangements, Chet repaired to the one restaurant in town and put in an order for both Willis and himself. The proprietor laughed as instructions were given to deliver Willis's meal at the jail.

"A queer customer, that man," he grinned. "But I like him. Everybody does, I reckon, 'ceptin' mebbe Graff. He ain't any too well thought of hereabouts, that Graff ain't! I guess Rem won't do much to the pore old codger fer stealin' that liquor!"

"Pretty fair fellow, ain't he, this judge?" Chet asked.

"None better. Kinda hipped on legal questions, and he won't even express an opinion on a chicken stealin' case less'n he reads up plenty aforehand!"

"Is he a friend of Graff's?"

"I don't know no friends of Graff, mister!"

"He spoke like he was right well-known in these parts."

"That he is! He ain't a maker o' friends, though. Leastwise, not friends like you and me. He spends a lot o' time away from town. I reckon he's plungin' a heap down in Vilend. That town is havin' a great boom, you know. Land is sellin' right fast down thataway, they tell me.

"The railroad and all the buildin' that'll be done there for the new slaughterin' and tannin' houses—right smart growth goin' on down there in the next few years. It oughta help us here in time, too. Course we're a long ways off, but the more shippin' goes through here from there the bigger we're bound to grow, I says."

Chet agreed with the man. "That's where we're goin' now, to Vilend," he said. "I reckoned my hoss would do well down in a new place like that."

"Sure! You'll take in a heap o' money with that critter, mister. He's wuth his weight in gold, that hoss. If I was you, I'd keep a close eye on him, too. Steve Graff is a bad man to git ag'in' you."

The thought that the man might make a move to injure or kill Rags brought Chet to his feet with a bound.

"I ain't hintin' anythin', mister!" the restaurant owner hastened to say. "I'm only sayin' that a hoss as val'ble as that one and a fight with Graff oughta make you think some!"

For the balance of the day Chet was scarcely out of sight of the stable. He took Rags to the hall that night and, though the animal was uncertain and nervous because of being taken inside, the exhibition was a huge success. Immediately it was over, Chet saddled the horse and rode out into the night. They spent the night on the plains where both felt more at home and where Chet was surer of himself in case any attempt was made against Rags.

At dawn they were on the way back to town, and Chet had his breakfast in the

restaurant and went to the jail where court was to be held. Graff was there in readiness to testify, and Chet saw that the man had bandaged his twisted wrist. He glowered hatefully as Chet approached, but the young man merely grinned and leaned against the wall of the court room to await developments.

With considerable pomp Rem Tate appeared and took his place on the bench. It developed that there was no attorney for the prosecution, the offense being a minor one. The State's offering against Willis was a simple one.

The sheriff told of the complaint against him and his arrest. Then Graff swore that he had employed Willis as a porter, and that, within an hour of his starting work, he had disappeared and with him two bottles of Graff's best whisky.

Tate turned to Willis and asked if he had a statement to make.

"Your honor," the tramp began, "I have! Not alone a statement, but a defense as well. I would like the privilege of cross-examination. I desire that Mr. Graff be sworn and turned over to me for questioning."

Tate took the matter under advisement, read mysteriously among some huge, leather-bound books, and finally called Graff forward and swore him.

"Now, Mr. Graff," Willis opened, "everything that I ask you will have a bearing upon the case in point. I am being tried for having committed a crime. It is my right to offer testimony of myself and others which will tend toward the establishment of my innocence or guilt—"

"Have I gotta lissen to this yam, judge?" Graff demanded, irately.

"Silence!" Tate roared. "This is a court room in which the majesty of the law is on display. You will answer this defendant's questions or answer for contempt!"

"First," Willis smiled easily, "how old are you, Mr. Graff?"

"What the hell's that got to do with—"

"Silence! This here court will plaster a fine on you that'll make your ear ache if you make another bust like that, Steve Graff!" the judge bellowed. "I'll decide whether this man's questions have a bearing on this case. Answer."

"Forty-nine!"

"Forty-nine years old, eh?" Willis smiled. "I see. Now, where were you born?"

Graff shifted his position hopelessly, pursed his lips for another outburst of anger, glanced at Tate, then answered:

"Chicago."

"You been out here how long?"

"Thirty years."

"Runnin' saloons a good share of that time?"

"At one time or another, you bet! There ain't a man in this country any better known than me!"

"I imagine so," Willis agreed. "I imagine so. Now, what brands of whisky is the best?"

"What?"

"I say—what brands of whisky is the best whisky?"

"I—I dunno—" in sullen tone.

"Then you don't know the saloon business any too well, do you?"

"There's lots of fine whisky!" angrily.

"What brands of the best do you sell?"

Graff hastily named several brands.

"You carried all o' them?"

"Yes. I still do."

"In large quantities?"

"Large enough."

"What is large enough?"

"I allus have some on hand."

"How do you manage to know just when to replenish your stock?"

"You mean buy more?"

"I do."

"Why—we count up! What's all this got to do with you stealin' my liquor arter I trusted you alone?"

"What brand did I steal?"

Graff confessed he did not know.

"How do you count up?"

"How do you count anything, yuh damned fool—just go and count 'em!"

"Twenty dollars fine, contempt o' court," Tate chanted. "Usin' profane lang'widge!"

Graff was fairly frothing at the mouth. Willis was beaming in delighted fashion.

"Don't excite yourself, Mr. Graff," he

suggested. "I have only a question or two more. Can you write?"

"Yes!" In violent tone.

"Figure?"

"Yes!"

"Can your bartender do both?"

"No! It ain't his job to do 'em."

"Do you always count the liquor you are carrying?"

"Mostly I—"

"Not always? Remember—you are under oath, Mr. Graff!"

"Not always."

"When you count the bottles do you keep a record on paper that you could produce in court?"

"No. I trust my bartender. Anybody knows he's honest—"

"That is all, Mr. Graff." When the enraged witness had left the stand, Willis addressed the judge. His arguments were very simple and direct. He told the judge he had worked at the place briefly, but that Graff had failed to prove that he had stolen anything at all.

"Here is a man forty-nine years old who has been running bars for twenty years. He proves it by naming the good brands of whisky and admitting that he carries them. But he doesn't keep an inventory, and he cannot, therefore, swear that the two bottles he claims I stole, might not have been missing before I ever went there!

"His bartender cannot read nor write; therefore, even though both men are quite honest, no legal inventory, acceptable as such, is in evidence. I see no need of pleading. I submit that the State has failed in its obligation of proving, first, that anything was stolen; and second, that, if it was, I stole it!"

There was nothing for Tate to do. In his heart he knew that this smiling vagabond before him was guilty of stealing the liquor. Every one in the room knew it, for that! But where was proof? Tate squirmed, turned the pages of his books again glanced about him—

Standing against the wall Chet could scarcely suppress a guffaw of laughter at the supreme and confident impudence of this tramp partner of his. Where had Willis conceived this idea? Whence came the poise of him as he faced the court?

"Acquitted on account no proof!" Tate snapped finally. "Steve Graff, trot up here and turn over twenty dollars as a lesson to you to respect the court. Court's adjourned!"

Willis met Chet with a smiling handshake.

"So be it," he said, gayly. "Justice is blind."

"Blinder'n hell!" Chet admitted. "You know darn well you stole that liquor!"

"Yes? Ah, well! If Justice be blind then so is she poetic. I also drank the damned stuff, Chet!"

While the street buzzed with the humorous aftermath of the trial, Chet went to the stable, bought a horse and saddle for Willis, and then dragged the man to the store where he outfitted him in presentable clothes.

They rode down the street with the smiling good wishes of the citizens of Powder Gap. As they passed from the town, Willis, a new Willis in his independence and new clothes, turned to Chet.

"On, on we go! Heros two! The world is at our feet and we'll trample on her, Chet! We'll trample—on to Vilend!"

CHAPTER VII.

VILEND.

"HOW much money we got left, Chet?" Willis asked after Powder Gap had been left behind them. "I reckoned up the cost of these precious habiliments, and it seems to me that we spent more than we got out of our first venture. Did you collect more than a hundred last night?"

"Nope. You see I had forty bucks when I met you."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Think of that! And we spent all that time together out there by the tracks without my ever suspecting it! When you said you were looking for a job I lost count, I guess—but—you used your own money for some of these things?"

"Sure. We're hooked up together, ain't we, Willis? I play thataway."

"Chet, we're hooked up closer than you'll ever suspect now! That was a fine thing to do. Ever been kicked around like a tramp has to be, Chet?

"Know what it is to have every dog bark at sight of you? Every man grin at you, and every woman draw her skirts close about her and get ready to turn when you show up? I guess not. If you had, though, you'd be able to judge how it feels to find a fellow like you."

They rode a long time in silence. Then it was Willis who spoke again.

"How much did we pay for this hatrack I'm riding, Chet?"

"Eighty bucks—good hoss too, Willis. He ain't no hatrack."

"I'm more used to riding the beams than I am to sitting on a horse, Chet. Did you look over this critter's legs when you bought him?"

"You bet! I know hosses right well, Willis. That critter's sound as a berry, too!"

"Good. I was going to ask that you ride back a little and watch his knees. I am ready to take oath that they never bend! He walks like a man on stilts, Chet!"

"He's a well-gaited hoss, Willis," Chet roared. "Honest he is! It's just 'cause you ain't used to ridin' much."

"His hips are too high, I think! Every time his foot lands his hip bumps my ribs."

"We'll take it slow and easy, Willis. There ain't any great hurry, and arter you've spent a coupla days on leather you'll feel fine. That hoss is sound as a berry, as I said. His eye is good and I take it he's well-mannered, but we'll know him like a book after a few days."

"Has it occurred to you that discovering his temperament is a poor task for a man with temperament himself?"

"I reckon he's all right. I'll watch him for you."

"Why not ride him for me—let me sit that marvelous thinking machine of yours in safety." Willis meant well, but his words sounded like a sacrilege to Chet.

"You ride Rags?" he gasped. "Why, say, Willis, there ain't ever been another man atop this hoss! In the first place I don't think any other man could get within a mile of him, and in the second he'd hate me forever if they did! Ride Rags? Not for all the money in the State!"

"Which would appear to settle the matter indefinitely," Willis grunted. "I shall, therefore, remain impaled upon this unworthy contrivance called a saddle. I rest my case on the clemency of your sweet and charitable disposition."

"Where do you get all them words, Willis?" Chet asked, impulsively. "It ain't my business to pry into yours, but I can't help but hold my breath when you start slingin' lang'widge! The way you smeared that court thing was plumb pretty!"

"Ah! Genius is ever the gift of the gods, Chet. Where did you get your muscular power, your natural courage—your red hair?"

"Damn my red hair," Chet half snarled. "And damn my freckles too, before you get that far! Lay off my personal appearance, Willis. They has done me enough harm—"

At that point Chet caught a glimpse of Willis's face and the look of amazed hurt therein terminated his remarks abruptly. "Forget it, Willis," he grinned then. "Nev' mind if I seemed sore—I really ain't."

"My right hand has ever been a worthy adjunct to a worthless carcass, Chet—but here and now I would cut it off rather than hurt your feelings—"

"Forget it," Chet admonished. "Questions never did do anybody any good, anyhow. You and me'll take each other as we find each other, and that's good enough fer me."

"Me, too, Chet—and now that we are speakin' of carcasses, just when do you imagine we ought to make that first stop?"

"Right here," Chet grinned. "I'm sure surprised you can't stay up longer than you do, Willis. This ridin' is all a matter of time; you gotta stick to it till you learn, that's all."

"If I stay up another ten minutes, Chet, I'll be stuck to it for the rest of my life."

They reined in and slid to the ground. Willis started to stretch his legs and the attempt, due to the natural rotundity of his

body and the unaccustomed feel of the ground after the riding, was ludicrous. Chet sat down and laughed until tears dimmed his eyes.

"This takes me back to the years of my glowing boyhood, Chet!" Willis announced, finally. "At that time I became proficient on a device called roller skates. I would skate for hours at a time. Then, when I removed the skates and attempted to walk —well, I feel just like that now!"

"Yes—and I reckon you'll find the soreness o' learnin' both skatin' and ridin' is apt to center in the same spot, Wilis."

"I'm not sure. I learned at home, and we used carpets."

With Vilend a two-day ride they loafed along suiting the convenience and the whim uppermost at the moment. There was no particular hurry, and both men were gaining famously in their liking for each other. Chet saw that, under the bantering tone of Willis there was a seriousness that amounted to the philosophical. He had innate intelligence, natural brilliance, and a trained mind.

It became evident that his superficiality was attracted to the opposite condition in Chet. Chet was all four-square. His thoughts were apt to be ponderous, but they were just as apt to be logical and in sequence of importance.

So they grew to know each other. Chet taught his new partner all that it is possible to teach a man about riding. Willis, doubtless because he saw he must do it rather than from any sense of perseverance, stuck to his task and made progress. They covered a considerable distance before night, for, if their pace had been a leisurely one, it had been constant.

They camped that night, and for an hour Chet spent his whole attention upon drilling Rags. He rehearsed all the well-known tricks and instilled in the brain of the horse that which he would slowly develop into new tricks. He felt that a new world had certainly opened before him. Ahead lay adventure. The new had supplanted the old, all the things of which a man may dream were his for the taking.

But, long after the snores of his partner had settled into the regularity and resonance of deep sleep, Chet lay awake. Before the eyes of his recollection appeared the big room of the Fisher ranch, the face of Evelyn, the daintiness of her hands and the luster of her eyes. Then his ears would ring with her scorn and he would toss in his blankets until Rags, ever watchful, would draw near and cock his head so that the star on his face would show in the faint light of the fire.

The early morning efforts of Willis were a thing to be wondered at. Apparently, every muscle in his body had been caked with soft fat for years. Now, after they had been roused from their peaceful inactivity, they presented in chorus a violent complaint. In the parlance, every move that Willis made brought forth from some unknown muscle of his body a violent "how come?"

It is a condition common to the new rider. There is nothing to be done about it because there is nothing worth doing about it. Like the tide, it rises and, irretrievably, passes. But, unlike the tide, having passed, it returns not, so long as one continues to ride. However, in its passing there lurks true misery, and misery, associated with obesity superficiality, and innate good humor is ever a weird thing.

"Death, dear Chester," Willis assured, "like everything else, is relative—"

"Don't call me Chester!"

"I think, Chet, now that I am in a position to gauge the extent of the injury which can arise from riding, that you have been riding on your disposition, whereas I —well—tender is a mild word and I hesitate in the use of invectives with one so close to my heart!"

"Git up and move around! Come over here and throw this saddle over your hoss. Watch out he don't reach around and tear the arm outa that new shirt, too. He's prob'ly just as sore as you are, the way you been ridin' him!"

"If he and I were not to meet again throughout all the years of our lives, that would be years too soon, Chet. I respond to your command from no desire, let me tell you! This is raw, red courage!"

Thus did Chet teach Willis to saddle, mount, and fight against the immense physi-

cal discomfort which gripped him. And thus was the start made for the glowing end of the trail. For that night was to find them in the boom town of Vilend.

Willis found the going easier as they progressed. The sun beat down upon them, and the perspiration streamed down his face and dripped from the beard that had begun to wreathe his features again. But that very exertion and perspiring was the best thing that could happen to him.

From the moment the town of Vilend appeared before them Willis's spirits rose. He was insuppressible by nature. He spoke in glowing terms of the future ahead, of the manner in which they would conquer the town, of the fame that would come upon them by reason of the wonderful Rags.

Fortunately, the new horse had been "broken to trains." He stood quite docile as the first puffing engine came within earshot of them. Not so Rags. With a whinny of terror he whirled on his hind legs and darted for the open spaces. Chet gave him a tight rein, talked to him evenly and gently as he ran; but terror was too deep for immediate obedience.

A white lather appeared on his flanks and withers. His nostrils were distended and his ears laid back. His hoofs thundered with the speed of his flight and, to add to the fear that gripped him, the locomotive screeched forth a blast from its whistle.

Willis gasped in amazement at the speed with which Rags covered ground. He cried out in delight at the manner in which Chet sat the terrified horse even when Rags, totally absorbed in his frenzy, struggled blindly for freedom from saddle and mount. For twenty minutes the battle went on; and in that time no spur touched the glossy side of the horse; no harsh command reached the quivering ears.

Slowly, in ever decreasing circles, Chet worked his pony back toward Willis and the dread locomotive. Finally, after Rags was covered with lather from his exertion, he gained control enough to understand what Chet was saying to him. At that time Chet slid from the saddle and took the nervous head in his arms. He talked to the pony incessantly, and always in the easiest, the tenderest of tones.

Willis saw the two start toward him, then, Chet leading the way and Rags following on lagging hoofs. When they were near at hand Chet called out:

"Lead your hoss up close to that engine, Willis." Willis slid to the ground and followed the order. Rags watched intently while the process was completed. All that time Chet was talking to him in a soothing tone. When Willis was close as he could get Chet took Rags by the nostrils and called to the engineer to blow his whistle.

The blast came and Rags planted his four feet for a mighty lunge. At that point Chet closed down on the nostrils and spoke his first word of sharp command. Trembling, Rags stood still. Very slowly Chet led him forward until the engine was close at hand. Because the other horse was unafraid and because Chet was there, Rags sniffed of the great machine. In five minutes he stood quiet beside it, though his eyes never left it.

The engineer caught the signal to go ahead and called a warning. Chet stood by. With great, raucous puffs and darting of steam the engine ground forward. Rags, his eyes trained now upon Chet as though remaining there solely to protect the man from this terrible menace, stood his ground.

"He's all right now," Chet smiled; then he stroked the pony's nose and mounted. Rags stood like a statue while the string of rattling box cars rolled by but a few feet distant.

"He's the greatest horse in the world!" Willis avowed. "The greatest horse ever born! He will take this town by storm just as sure as the sun shines, Chet!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

NEXT WEEK'S COMPLETE NOVELETTE:

"WINGS OF ADVENTURE," By Will McMorrow

The Bar-J Republic

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Wild Paradise," "The Starlit Trail," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

IT was the proudest moment in the life of Wynkoop, the barber. He sat there—a frail wisp of a man with pomaded curls and the eyes of a startled kit fox. All the red, blue, and white chips were piled up at his side of the table, and there was only one adversary left of the five who had sat in that game.

And yet, what an adversary! It was, in fact, no other than Chief Jonlee—Big Jonlee, the owner of the Bar-J, which meant the owner of several counties, including a good part of Sonora County, Mexico.

Fat, pale-eyed, red-headed Jonlee, who held sway on all the ranges from Cobb's Coulee to Soda Mesa—Jonlee, the cattle king, who had a little army of his own: seventy-five breed renegades who ought to have been hanged long before their master outfitted them in khaki and shoulder holsters and carbines and sombreros. There he was, sitting on one side of the table, with his military staff behind him—four murderous gentlemen ready to do his slightest bidding.

And poor, unlucky Wynkoop—humble, nervous, brown-eyed little barber—was getting a phenomenal run of straights and fulls!

No, it was not due to any clever manipulation of the deck. Far from it. If Wynkoop had ever wanted to cheat in his life, he would have done so now. And he would most certainly have dealt himself a losing hand every shot until he was cleaned out.

But no—luck was against him. He had never had such high hands in his life. He had frozen out four of Jonlee's giant henchmen; and now the hulking bully Jonlee himself, the worst loser that ever sat in a game of draw-poker, was facing him,

glowering out of venomous, pallid eyes. Then suddenly the barber was dealt a measly pair of deuces.

"Thank God!" he breathed to himself. He shoved out a tremendous stack of blues.

Jonlee's big jaws whitened as he clenched his teeth. He had a good hand himself—for the first time: a full. He started in to bet, and made a timid raise.

The barber was overjoyed. At last his dread adversary was going to recoup, and the barber could go back to his shop comfortably cleaned out, and with his health.

But mark how the fates were against him.

Jonlee saw him shove out another huge stack of blues. Before matching it, the cattle king studied his full house again, his thick fingers trembling slightly as he spread his cards in a tiny fan. Well, a full house was a full house, and not to be thrown away for nothing. So he tried again—matching the stack and adding a stingy raise.

The barber repeated it. It was not, speaking in terms of the cow country, a very high game. But this particular hand soared. The cattle king had bought five stacks of chips—and this hand might win them all back. In plain terms, he stood to win or lose five hundred dollars.

Now, the barber, so overjoyed was he at having those two deuces, made a grave mistake. He plunged right along with his big stacks. And having won so much during the evening, he was able to go beyond his adversary's five hundred mark.

"I raise you again, this much, pard," he said in a congenial small voice.

"You measly little seedwart!" the other exploded. "You snivelin' little skunk! I've a good mind to plug you here and now for the double-dealin' thief you are!"

The barber's thin face turned white—and Jonlee's eyes turned yellow. It was a terrible sign. The cowman could stand losing half a herd through drought or rinderpest; but to be skinned out of five hundred dollars by a barber at draw-poker with his own henchmen standing behind him powerless to do anything—well, that was simply excrutiating.

"I'll git him one way or another for this!" he mumbled through his teeth.

"He'll git me one way or another," the barber mumbled fearfully to himself. And he prayed that his opponent would stack up to that one last raise. Then the show-

down would reveal the fact that the barber had been making a ridiculous bluff. It was a bluff, all right, but unfortunately it was not ridiculous.

The cattle king backed down! No use buying any more chips to buck this game. That scurvy barber, so Jonlee thought, must have had a full himself—and one which could top Jonlee's. That was the way the luck had been going all evening, anyway.

"All right, damn your yellow hide. It's yourn!" Jonlee grumbled.

"Ain't even showin' down?" the barber cried miserably.

"It's yourn, I said!" the other shouted, pushing the huge pile across with his forearm.

"I'll let you in for five more blues," the barber wheedled in a weak but desperate voice.

The other blasted out an oath.

"Five more!" he yelled. "How much more do you want to skin us out of, you snivelin' little miser? Five more! Do you hear that, gents?"

He turned to his henchmen. "Not satisfied with cleanin' us all out, he wants *five more* to end up the evenin' with! What 'll we do with him? String him up for the cheat that he is! That's my opinion."

One of his "captains"—a very wise breed with a straight white mustache, high cheek bones, and glittering eyes—plucked his master's sleeve.

"Better pay him what you owe him, and forget it, chief. There's too many onlookers. We must take our medicine."

"Pay him off?" the big cowman repeated, as if he had completely forgotten this formality. "Yes—consarn the thievin' little rat!"

Inasmuch as Jonlee had been the banker, he had to go through the unpleasant business of buying back all the chips the barber had won.

It was unpleasant not only for Jonlee, but for the barber likewise. The latter suggested meekly:

"No hurry, chief. Any time will do."

"How much do I owe you?" the chief snorted belligerently.

Beside the five hundred he had lost, it was up to him now to buy back all the chips which the barber had won from the other players.

"I cleaned them out at a hundred apiece, chief," the barber said in a tortured voice. "And my own chips was a hundred likewise. All you have to do is to give back the money we give you at the openin' of this here game."

He said nothing about the five hundred that the chief owed him.

The chief handed him over the rolls that the other players had bequeathed him. "There you are, Mr. Skunk," he said. "That settles them. Now, concernin' my five hundred—"

"Ain't no hurry whatsomever about that, chief," the barber put in ingratiatingly.

"Oh, they ain't, ain't they?" the chief snapped. "Well, I figure they's all kinds of hurry. I ain't a man who cancels my gambling debts—am I, gents?"

His henchmen standing behind him chimed in graciously that he was not; and the barkeep chimed in likewise, and so did the barber himself.

"I should say not, chief," said the latter. "We all know that all right enough."

"But," the chief went on, stroking his great bristled jaw, "at the present time I don't happen to have five hundred dollars on myself. Just paid ten thousand for a Galloway bull from Carson Junction."

The barber started to breathe more easily. "It's all righto, chief," he began cheerily.

"Oh, no, it ain't—it ain't all right by no manner of means. I ain't goin' to be indebted to no snivelin' little hair cutter—not me. I won't have that said of Big Chief Jonlee. I'm goin' to pay you right here and now—only in a different coin from the specie of this United States of America."

Again the barber's heart sank. If he had only stayed out of that unlucky game!

The military escort of Jonlee as well as the gamblers at the other tables gathered about, expecting to see a bit of gunshooting. Their chief was a man who would not acknowledge defeat.

They knew he would not let a barber strip him this way in a card game. He would get out of the trimming in one way or another—but just how, they did not know. It would probably be something very disagreeable.

" Shank," Jonlee called out to one of the barkeeps, " get that bag of bills from my office."

The crowd stared. Just what could this mean?

Jonlee explained.

" To show that I have no hard feelin's," he said, using a purring voice now which he always assumed when covering his rage, " I'm goin' to pay you here and now—and pay you much more'n a measly little five hundred dollars."

The barber's heart beat like a bird's.

Shank, the barkeep, came from the inner office behind the bar bearing a satchel, which the master opened.

" You see these here bills?"

On the table there rolled an astonishing wealth in green-backed, gilt-edged paper currency. The bills were dog-eared, torn, stained, and gave evidence of having been used by many hands—or at any rate for many years.

The barber took up one of the packages as if afraid that it was an animal that might sting him.

" Read it. What does it say?" the chief commanded.

" They's ten up here in the corner," the barber said piteously as he stared at the stained, parchmentlike slip. " And here's a buzzard or a condor holdin' some crossed flags. Never seen this kind of bill before."

" How much does the bill say it's worth?"

" It's in Spanish," replied the barber. " It says ' *Pagarà al portador Diez Pesos.*' "

" That means the bearer gets ten pesos, or dollars, on demand," explained the chief.

" Who do you demand for it?" asked the barber meekly.

" The Republic of Santa Cruz, of course. Don't it say up there in the other corner that the Republic of Santa Cruz will redeem them bills?"

" It sure does," agreed the barber.

" Well, all as you have to do is to go to the Republic of Santa Cruz and cash in. But, bein' that 'll take a lot of trouble, I'm goin' to make it worth your while. I ain't only goin' to give you five hundred pesos, but I'm goin' to give you all the bills that you find in this satchel."

Every one murmured in astonishment. Obviously some of the bills were in fifty dollar denominations. There were packages and packages of them—enough to take a good night of counting.

The chief thrust his thumbs into his bearskin vest and went on in the same purring voice:

" Of course, you'll have to figure out the rate of exchange afore you can tell just how rich you are." He called to his barkeep: " Look here, Shank, you know somethin' about geography. Just what is the rate of exchange between our country and this here Republic of Santa Cruz?"

Shank answered readily: " The last time the exchange was give out I figure it was somethin' like one peso to our dollar."

" There you are!" said the chief. " One peso to the dollar. Now all you have to do is to count them pesos, and right away you know how rich you are."

The barber cast his eye over the pile on the green baize of the table top. His face twisted into a weak but appreciative smile.

" Looks like I'll have thousands of dollars, chief," he said.

" Thousands?" the other snorted disgustedly. " Millions is more like it! Just count them pesos, and then might be you will figure I ain't such a bad loser as folks say I am."

" I'll say you ain't, chief," the barber admitted. He stuffed the bills back into the satchel. " But just where is this Republic of Santa Cruz at?"

" Now you've axed us somethin'," the chief replied. " Shank, you tell him where this Republic of Santa Cruz is at."

" Not very far, gents." Shank wiped his mahogany with contemplative sweeps. " In fack, it used to be just south of Sody Mesa over the next hog's back west."

" Used to be!" the barber repeated, scarcely voicing his words.

"It didn't exist very long," the barkeep went on. "Only about a month; but long enough to print a good heap of currency and to elect and shoot a president. That was, I might say, a century ago."

The barber swallowed convulsively. He was a thin man with a long neck and a small, apprehensive face. When he swallowed, it was the most picturesque facial expression he could assume. "I see," he murmured.

"You can use those bills to wipe off the lather from your razors when you're shavin' the townsfolk," said a voice.

Every one looked startled. The idea of any one making a remark like that! Was this not a gift—a very generous gift of Big Chief Jonlee himself? The nerve of a stranger so much as suggesting that these bills were worthless!

Every one turned around. And there in one corner of the gaming room they saw a gaunt young man with a desert burned face and two eyes which resembled the muzzles of guns. They were steel gray eyes that flashed angrily.

The pupils were dark, and yet there was a bright light in them. It was precisely the sort of light that flashes from the round dark bore of a six-gun when you stick some paper in the sun and shine a light into the breech to see if you've properly cleaned out all the lint and grease.

All of Jonlee's men scowled at the stranger. All the military staff of ragged Mexicans, all the players, the barkeeps—yes, Wynkoop, the barber, himself scowled. Why couldn't this stranger have let well enough alone? The barber was more than satisfied with the outcome.

In fact, Wynkoop knew that something was going to happen if he didn't get out of that room immediately. He stuffed the rest of the bills back in the carpetbag, buckled it shut, thrust it under his arm, and started for the door.

But this gaunt young desert man thrust out his long legs and barred the hapless Wynkoop's exit.

"Wait a minute, pard," he said. "I'd admire to talk to you awhile."

"About what?" asked the miserable barber.

"About how you can dispose of those thousands you've got in that bag—and at a good rate of exchange."

II.

THE young man shoved back his chair and arose. The silent crowd looked upon a tall, rangy prospector—evidently hounded into town by the desert heat, the sandstorm, the drought.

As he stepped across the floor all the habitués of the cantina got up from their chairs. And a circle widened, leaving a bare, sawdust-covered spot, in which the stranger and Jonlee stood face to face.

From the outskirts of that ring of grim, silent men, Wynkoop, the barber, standing on tiptoe, looked at the young stranger and his soul went out in the most adoring and eternal fealty.

As for no particular reason known to man, a friendless dog will pledge himself in eternal allegiance to a tramp, thus did Wynkoop, the barber, pledge himself to this rangy wanderer from the desert.

From that day on, so Wynkoop swore to himself, this stranger was his master—and his pard. His word was to be law. His friendship was to be Wynkoop's religion. His every wish was to be fulfilled as a slave fulfills the wish of a king.

Unfortunately, however, Wynkoop was not at that particular moment in a position to declare his oath of allegiance.

The stranger from the desert had hemmed himself in with a circle of Jonlee's henchmen—and it would be the luckiest hour of his life if he got out alive. Wynkoop stood there with beating heart; one hand holding his carpetbag of bogus money, the other poised over his holster.

Meanwhile the stranger and Jonlee were becoming acquainted.

The latter was speaking:

"I'm right glad to know you, stranger. But bein' this is a law-abidin' community—the custom of never askin' a man his name or business has been done away with. In plain terms I'd admire to know who you are!"

"Tom Colby's my name—from Soda Mesa Desert."

"Then the desert's where you better be now. If you're goin' to spread a loop like this you'll need a powerful lot of open space."

"There's room, hombre, right here for you and me to meet on this dance floor in a good, honest-to-God fist fight—unless you buy back those pesos—at their face value."

"You mean—pay that little tonsorial seedwart a dollar for every paper peso I give him!" Jonlee gasped, his lips trembling.

"That's what I mean!" said Colby.

"Well, I'll show you if a locoed tramp like you with his brain twisted by desert heat kin come in here and try to work *me* over."

Instead of taking off his leather cuffs and rolling up his sleeves as the crowd confidently expected, Jonlee's hand went to his holster.

Wynkoop, straining himself to his full five feet six, could not see what happened then. But he knew it was something little short of a miracle. He could see Jonlee's face—which for a moment had been like a mask of rusty iron, begin to melt.

The tight lips whitened and broke to a weak grin. The big pudgy hands were lifted.

Could it be possible! Wynkoop could not believe his eyes; and yet it was clear enough. That audacious young wild man from the Soda Mesa Desert had actually stuck up Jonlee, the king, the almighty, the invincible!

How Wynkoop adored and wondered; And how he pitied his new-found idol! In another moment that glorious young filibusterer would be riddled with bullets by a dozen Mexican gunmen. It was as appalling as it was glorious.

Wynkoop knew what was coming, but he wouldn't stand for it. He drew his gun —and peered around cautiously to see just who was going to draw and plug the stranger in the back.

There seemed to be no one in Wynkoop's immediate surroundings that had this intention. Instead from the other side of the room some breed took his cue. A gun barked out. The habitués of the cantina scampered off in every direction, ducking behind gaming tables, behind doors, behind the bar. A good many stampeded to the front entrance.

And there was Jonlee standing in the middle of the room; and facing him was that luckless but glorious young desperado, Tom Colby. His gun had clattered to the floor and he was clutching his wounded right hand.

"Now I'm willing to fight!" said big Jonlee with a malignant attempt at humor.

The barber saw the huge mountain of bone and muscle and red beef straighten up belligerently. The crowd was going to be treated to the spectacle of Jonlee beating up a wounded man.

Wynkoop had a stomach that was easily affected by scenes of this nature. And, being a barber, he had a very steady hand. He lifted his six-gun.

Now, the shot that had wounded the stranger had already blown out a few of the lights in the gaming room by the force of concussion. Wynkoop observed that there were three more.

He likewise observed that the stranger was eying his gun hungrily as it lay at his feet, knowing full well that if he were to reach down for it, it would be the last gesture of his life.

If he could only be granted a single second to pick up that gun, he would, with his left hand, put up a marvelous fight—and Wynkoop instinctively knew it.

It was for that reason that the little barber emptied his revolver at the three oil lamps that swung above the gaming table, bar and dance floor.

There was immediate darkness. And then a rapid series of white flashes from many guns.

Wynkoop, pressing his carpetbag against his breast, backed away to the door. He felt the bag jump in his arms as a bullet hit it. It gave the impression of containing something that was alive. Those stacks of bills inside had, no doubt, stopped several bullets as Wynkoop got to the door.

Out in the moonlight he saw men running in every direction; horses wheeling; men mounting, galloping their cayuses down the sandy moonlit street.

One of the men kept on riding past the

Mexican hovels at the lower end of the town; past the cyaniding mills of the U. J. Mine; past the Last Chance cantina, and across the dry creek bed to the desert plain.

Wynkoop was not sure who this was. But the peculiar manner in which the man had vaulted to his little pinto, and the limpness of his right arm; and the fact that a group of horsemen made a vain attempt to follow him, hurling white streaks of fire in his wake, convinced the barber that this was his new-found friend, the strange youth who had defied the king of that country.

III.

It was a few weeks later when Wynkoop was closing up his barber shop, that some one knocked on the bolted door.

"Who in tarnation is it?"

"A customer."

"I'm closin' up."

"Can't help it. I have a three weeks' growth of beard and I'd admire to have you scrape it off."

Then Wynkoop knew who it was, and his little heart swelled and contracted and swelled again with wonder and joy.

He opened the door, and the yellow light of his oil lamp shone out into the dark street. The rays fell upon a gaunt, desert-burned face, the fine cut, youthful features of which were smirched with a reddish beard.

"Didn't reckon I'd see you again, pard," Wynkoop exclaimed, "after you'd found out how Jonlee rules this here range. Which I figured he'd learned you your lesson good and proper. And look at me. Jonlee accused me of puttin' out them lights in that fight you staged. I got out of it all right—sayin' a Mex tried to get my carpetbag and hundred thousand dollars away from me. Then I said I fired at him, but didn't aim straight. So he says, all very well, I was the start of the fight. And his deputy arrested me. They was a phony trial and I was fined four hundred dollars, which was all the cash I had to my name."

The stranger swore: "Jonlee rules all righto, and I couldn't figure out a way to beat him—except with figuring good and hard for three weeks. Out there in the Soda Mesa Desert while I was healing this crease of mine on my arm, I thought up a plan."

"A plan about what?" the other asked, apprehensively.

"A plan to make this cattle king pay you that poker debt!"

"Well, dad burn my hide! If any one hears you say that you'll have Jonlee's brand tattooed on yore neck with some buckshot."

The stranger continued resolutely:

"First I'd admire to see that carpetbag of bills Jonlee gave you after that poker game."

"What for?"

"I don't reckon you've counted it?"

"No, I ain't. I been usin' the bills for wipin' lather—same as you suggested."

"Well, get the bag out."

The barber obeyed. Colby took the bag, turned it upside down, took up one of the packages of bills. There was something about the way he took that package, tapped it against his knee, wet his thumb and turned up the corner of each bill that impressed Wynkoop. The stranger seemed to go about it as if he were a teller in a bank counting real money.

"I'm going to make Jonlee pay you every cent of this in good U. S. A. cash," he announced, then he started into count: "Ten, twenty, thirty—"

Again the worship of Wynkoop's eyes was softened with pity. The young prospector from the desert had probably suffered from the heat. The barber, fascinated at his professional and self-assured manner of counting, watched him begin on a package of a higher denomination:

"Three hundred, four hundred, eight, ten, twelve—two thousand. Here's another pack of the same—that makes four thousand."

"Say, look here, pard. You don't seem to remember. Them bills belonged to a republic which it don't exist except in hist'ry. The stuff ain't worth the fancy paper it's wrote on—"

"Engraved on," the other corrected. "It's going to be worth every cent. Twenty thousand. Two, four, six. Hello, here's some fifty peso denominations!"

The barber lit an oil lamp to heat some water preparatory to plying his trade.

"Ready for your shave, pard?"

"Not yet—ten, twenty, thirty—multiply by ten—add this bunch. That makes a hundred thousand pesos—in paper!"

The barber grunted. "Which it did you a lot of good wearin' your eyes out at a fool game like this. Why not play fantan with ourselves? We could git just as rich thataway."

"Mebbe so. But this money is payment for a poker debt," said the stranger, his steel gray eyes shining. "When you play fantan you have to pay yourself; poker, some one else pays you."

The stranger stuffed the bills back in the carpetbag; then arose and walked up and down the cluttered little room. He was a tall, gaunt fellow and his boots thumped heavily on the warped floor. As he walked, he puffed violently at the dry cigar.

"Look here," he said, suddenly, "have you a steady hand?"

"I'm one of the best shots in Mule Town, bein' I'm a barber."

"All right, then shave me."

The stranger got into a chair and the barber lathered the gaunt, burned face.

Tom Colby mumbled reflectively through the suds: "Here you are a barber shavin' the leather necks of cow-punchers, instead of being President."

"Me—President—whee, that's a good one."

The stranger cogitated while one side of his face was being scraped of its lather and the bristly red stubble. Then he burst out: "Pard, what would you do, if you were President?"

"Who—me? What'd I do? Well, I never give it much thought. But I reckon I'd fit this here shop out with a set of mirrors from top to bottom like they have at the parlors in Tucson. And I'd hire three manicures. If I was President I'd lay in a stock of highfalutin' perfumes—and—"

"Well, the lulu of a President *you'd* make," said the stranger, disgustedly. "But just the same I figure you'll have to pass. *Because you're going to be President by Saturday night!*"

The barber made a terrified sound, like a partially arrested hiccough.

"Look out there you've sliced my chin."

"Can you blame me, pard?" the barber pleaded. "For Pete's sake, warn me afore you shoot off another blaze like that! Me—President—Saturday night! What in tarnation, pard! I been sage-brushed enough! First I git a hundred thousand pesos handed me, then I git elected President—wow!"

The man who was being shaved disregarded this entirely and started off on what seemed another tack—or rather tantrum.

"Do you figure there's any one in this town who has it in for Jonlee—besides you and me?"

"Do I? I should say about fifty—seventy-five—a hundred men he's cross-fissured. Which he's stole their cattle, their lands, burned their houses, put 'em in jail, planted fights on 'em, bullied 'em into selling claims—"

"All right, we'll give all a chance to get back at him. But first do you figure that you could pick out a squad of the best sharpshooters among them. And while you're shaving them, argue them into starting a revolution?"

"A what?"

"Well, I mean tell 'em that if they want to rid this range of Jonlee and get back what he's stolen from them they can meet me—say, next Saturday morning for breakfast any place you designate."

"I could argue a hundred of 'em into it, bein' I shave every one in town."

"Don't want a hundred. Just a little gang. The smaller the better. Eight men make a squad. If you can do it, hoist up a towel on that barber pole of yours in the street. I can see it from the crest of Puma Mesa."

"A squad of fighters by next Saturday morning," the barber reflected. "I may be able to. And I mayn't. It's a powerful dangerous game."

"If you're successful—a towel—"

"Sure. I got towels."

"And it means you won't be a barber any more—but a President."

Little Wynkoop laughed in adulation, as a boy laughs at the breath-taking audacity of a hero in the movies. He powdered the

"revolutionist" with the customary final touches.

"Comb it wet or dry, pard?" he inquired.

IV.

HIGH above the pattern of shacks, corrals, and cantinas that composed Mule Town, Tom Colby stood watching the sun rise just behind Puma Mesa. Puma Mesa was a gigantic table of granite and quartz which almost overhung the little saloon town.

An alluvial fan spread from the base of the cliffs down to the town's first cantina. It was a steady slope of adobe, dotted with sage and cactus and made as perfect a grade as any surveyor could have staked out.

In fact, a narrow gauge track with no other grading than the necessary slag and bedding ties of piñon wood extended in a bee-line from a silver mine at the cliffs of the mesa to the town.

Tom Colby noticed this track, for it had a great deal to do with his project of overthrowing the régime of the cattle king, Jonlee. He noticed that the track entered the town running behind the buildings parallel to the one street and reaching its terminal behind a large shack of unpainted boards and roof of corrugated iron which had once been the cyaniding mill.

A siding or two on flat ground composed the "yards," the mill being on one side, a corral on the other. The lower end was bounded by Jonlee's cantina and by Wynkoop's barber shop. In front of the shop a warped pole stood tilted in the sand. A towel fluttered at its head!

Considerably before the main and only street of Mule Town was awake to the routine of the day, Tom Colby rode down from the heights of Puma Mesa, hitched his horse in the corral behind the barber's shack, and knocked at the door. Wynkoop was waiting for him.

"Come in here, pard, and get a shave," the barber said.

"What luck?" Colby asked.

"The best I could hope for. You see, they's a powerful big faction in this town which their trigger fingers is itchin' for to git at Jonlee. But they don't dast. I've went about this thing careful like, but I figure you'll be satisfied with the results. The main thing is to get shaved and powdered up gentlemanlike first, afore you meet up with yore army."

Wynkoop went to work enthusiastically, rapidly. But he gave evidence of a fervent desire to do an artistic job. In fact, he even finished off with a massage, a hot towel, and a powerful application of bay rum.

"Yore army's over there right now feedin' in a chowcart acrost the street," explained Wynkoop. "Eager to meet you. Will do anything you say. You wanted me to git a line on Jonlee's worst enemies, didn't you, now? Well, I done it."

"You've got the soul of a good revolutionist, pard," Colby said. "But I didn't want too many, you remember. Just a good squad of fightin', clear-eyed, hell-bendin' crack gunmen."

"You wanted quality, not quantity," the barber admitted. "Well, I saw to it that you'd get same."

They went across the street, Colby burning with curiosity and anticipation. Eight good cowboys who knew how to shoot would thrill any man's soul. He could hardly wait.

"Not much racket in there," he commented.

"The army's been told to keep their mouth shut," said the other.

Pete Horner's chowcart was a hot-dog stand boxed in on wheels—the whole contraption resembling a circus wagon with a smokestack. It was in a sand lot, with a stepladder leading up from the board sidewalk of the street.

Tom Colby went in first, leaping up the steps to open the door. Fried onions and the pungent smell of chile and beans struck him.

The place was fogged with steam. A lunch counter and tall stools, a window with horse flies buzzing at it, a Navaho blanket, black and grease, separating the counter from the pantry—that was all he saw.

It was empty, except for one rather slight and inconsequential figure. A girl turned

about on one of the tall stools, looked up at him, and smiled.

"Is this the boy that tried to fight Jonlee?" she said, holding out her hand.

"It shore is!" answered Wynkoop proudly. "Ain't he wonderful?"

"Well, I wonder!"

Her teeth flashed winsomely. Her black curls fell upon the calico dress at her shoulders. She was certainly unimportant-looking, frail, and with a skin so pink that the sun had made freckles instead of tanning it.

Tom Colby turned upon Wynkoop with a scowl.

"I thought you said my fighters would be in here feeding?"

"Shore I did. Your army. The army I been recruitin' all this past week. There it is. She's it."

"She's my army!" Tom cried, flushing.

"Why, shore! She's Bert Barton's little gal. That's who she is. And she's better'n ten armies."

"Look here, Wynkoop, you little seedwart! I asked you to get me a gang of crack fighters. We've got to meet up with Jonlee's Mexicans and breeds in a good, honest-to-God fight. I been waiting a week, and now you bring me this—"

He was going to say "this silly little sage hen," but he checked himself, and turned to her. "Excuse me, ma'am," he added, feeling a sudden thankfulness to Wynkoop for having shaved him. He saw her blue eyes peering at him with a worshipful sort of intensity. Tom Colby's own eyes dropped from the contemplation of a freckled, dimpled chin, of a flowered calico dress, of small feet in buttoned shoes.

He went on, his head—which he had bared—feeling rather damp: "This is a trick which this gallumpin' little jackass here has played on me. You aren't in it, ma'am. I didn't mean to say—"

"Oh, yes, I am in it!" the girl objected. "I'm pleased to meet you, Tom—Tom Colby!"

"I'll say she's shore in it!" cried the barber.

"In what?" Colby cried. "In this gun-fightin' we're goin' to pull off?"

"Oh, no—not the gun-fightin'; in the revolution," the barber explained.

Colby swore—under his breath. It was all right to talk about revolutions and presidents and the overthrow of a cattle king. But when he saw this girl smiling at him he felt like a boy caught at some game which he was much too big to be playing.

"Chick Wynkoop, here, said you were going to run Jonlee off the range," the girl said, "same as he's run off all the sheepmen and a lot of the law-abiding cowmen. He said you didn't think there ought to be any more kings, because this is a free country. So you were going to make him president."

Colby flushed from the roots of his hair to his Adam's apple at hearing his own words quoted. They sounded heroic enough when he was talking to a barber. You can tell a barber anything. But to have a girl hear!

Tom turned to Wynkoop as if to rend him to pieces. Tom's face—due to the steaming chowcart and his own peculiar feelings—had beaded with sweat. He wiped his lip with his hand, rolled a cigarette. For the first time in his life, as far as he could remember, his hand trembled as he held that match.

Wynkoop quailed under the two gray points of gun muzzles which were Tom's eyes.

"You axed me, pard, to get Jonlee's worst enemies. Well, I didn't git 'em all. But I got one, and I got the worst—and the most dangerous." He nodded toward the girl.

"She's all alone in this town. When I say all alone, I don't mean she ain't got friends. I mean she ain't got relatives, and she's supportin' herself workin' in this chowcart as waitress.

"But as for friends—the whole of Mule Town is her friend, so help me? Why? Because they all know Jonlee's after her. He's afraid to make any ungentlemanly advance. Won't no man stand for that in this country.

"But they know that one of these days he'll git her packed off into the Sierra by some of his breeds. And the gal—with her good little business here—has got too much

fightin' blood to git up and vamose. But we're all expectin' her to git rustled off any time, and we're all on her side. And *that's* why I said she's worth more'n any army you kin muster up around these parts!"

Colby's flushed face had turned color. He wiped his forehead and chin with a bandanna, and now felt extraordinarily cool. In fact, his hot embarrassment was completely gone. The coolness of a deadly anger enveloped him with the comfort of a damp cloth on a fevered man.

Wynkoop saw the transformation.

"Have a cup of coffee, pard. You look like you're tremblin' with hunger. Get him some flapjacks, gal."

They had breakfast. Yes, it was a humble little breakfast of flapjacks and bacon. But they were conscious that it was a meal that had a certain historical significance. For a few minutes they ate in silence, Tom Colby ruminating intently. Finally he burst out:

"It will be to-night!"

"To-night!" the barber exclaimed.

"To-night at twelve o'clock, Wynkoop, you and I are going to enter this town and set up the Bar-J Republic. Get your guns well oiled, and a lot of rounds of ammunition, and meet me after dark up on Puma Mesa at the mine."

"At the mine?" the barber repeated. "Why shag 'way up there?"

"Because I've hidden some carbines and rounds of ammunition with which to outfit our army. And I'll need one of those mine dump-cars to bring 'em into town. You and I could pack 'em on our cayuses, but it would be powerful unhandy."

"How kin you work them U. J. Mine cars without you have a engine? And how kin you git their engine without you attack the guards up at the mine?"

"Don't need an engine. Gravity is all we need. The grade goes straight down and doesn't stop till it gets into town."

"Pard, that's just the trouble," the barber said seriously. "I hope you know a thing or two about hog tyin' them dump-cars, or they'll come stampedin' down the grade and won't stop at the end of the tracks, either. Wunst a train of 'em bumped into the Grand Central Hotel and lifted same into Buckeye Creek."

"Meet me at the mine, and don't try to cross any more fool bridges."

"What am I to do?" the girl asked eagerly.

"Every chance you get during the day, when no one's looking, tack up a placard."

"What 'll be on the placard?"

Tom ripped down one of the signs from a wall of the chowcart. On one side was written the prices of chile con carne, enchiladas, flapjacks, bacon, and coffee. On the other side he printed in big letters the following pronunciamento:

Tonight at Midnight Jonlee Abdicates His Sway Over This Range. From Soda Mesa to the Border, from Cobb's Coulee to the Sierra, the Bar-J Republic Will be Established a New and Free State. The Flag Will Be Waved in Jonlee's Cantina and Gaming Parlor at Midnight and All Those Who Have a Grievance Against Him Will Pledge Their Allegiance to Same.

"Dadburn my hide, but that 'll git half the town!" the barber cried triumphantly.

"And stick this one up somewhere, too," Colby went on, tearing down another placard:

All Cowmen, Muckers, Gamblers, Barkeeps Invited to Become Citizens of the Bar-J Republic. No Indians or Mexes or Breeds. There Will Be a President, a Sheriff, a Secretary of Agriculture and Stock-Raising and a State Veterinary.

"Damn good—if you want my opinion!" the barber breathed. "But leave me write one!"

Tonight at Twelve Midnight. The Bar-J Republic President Will Be E-lected. Which Wynkoop the Tonsorial Artist Hereby Announces Hisself Candidate for Same.

He handed it to Nell, and as she read it aloud he qualified:

"Might be it would be wise not to stick that sign up, gal, till I'm out of town."

He looked to Tom, who was busy writing another placard. "Look here, pard, I reckon, bein' president, I'll have an army to do the shootin' for me."

"You and I are the army," said Tom.

"Holy smoke!"

"All you have to do is to come to the U. J. Mine after dark, bringing that carpet-bag with the peso bills."

"What's that for?"

Tom held up his last placard. "Coffee and rolls, two bits," was the legend on one side. On the other:

The Currency of the Bar-J Republic Will Be the Paper Bills which Jonlee Put Into Circulation the Night Wynkoop Froze Him Out on a Pair of Deuces.

Wynkoop blinked with his little brown eyes. He looked at Colby and gasped. He was like a hibernating fox coming out of his hole and facing a terrific glare of sun for the first time.

"You mean, pard, you're goin' to turn that hundred thousand pesos into real honest-to-goodness money?"

"I do!" affirmed his idol and hero. "Otherwise this Bar-J Republic won't be worth a whoop."

Wynkoop scratched his pomaded curls and murmured a prayer of adulation.

"Gal," he said, "ain't he simply grand?"

V.

An air of foreboding and fear settled upon Mule Town with the darkness of night. The Mexican element lurked about apprehensively, as if expecting a raid from a dangerous and mysterious enemy. The wives of stockmen and miners gathered their children from the street, and tucked them away in their bunks. Gamblers went on to the next town; cantina girls packed up their spangled dresses and belongings, preparatory to flight. Stock herders, expecting a hot time, went up and down the main street, reading those extraordinary signs.

No one knew how the signs had got there. In fact, by seven o'clock they were all torn down by Jonlee's orders. And once they were down, their purport was discussed and their words repeated with embellishments that fired the soul of every mucker or barkeep or cowboy in town with either anticipation or fear.

"'Tain't only a gun-fight; it's a war!" they said.

"They's goin' to be a new sheriff, a new everything—yes, even a president!"

"Jonlee's goin' to git run out of town. A band of renegade Apaches is goin' to raid us. They's goin' to be a army quartered in these here shacks! The town 'll be burned down, the womenfolk all rustled away! Won't be a man of us left to tell the tale!"

The center of excitement was Jonlee's cantina and gaming parlor, where Tom Colby had made his appearance that memorable night. It was noised about that Jonlee's cantina was to be, "in a manner speakin', the capitol of the Bar-J Republic."

The doors of the big shack were jammed with the crowd. In fact, the greater number of breeds and muckers and buckaroos preferred to congregate about the entrances—in preference to going in.

The sawdust-covered floor was bare. The baize top tables vacated. It was not a night for gambling, nor for carousing, nor for dancing. It was a night when every man was tortured by that most nerve-thrilling of all human actions—the action of waiting.

Jonlee himself—a lumbering mass of sinew, of huge bone, of bull neck, of sun-faded eyes, and rusty hair—walked down the center of the floor, stepped to the bar, took a swig, walked back, looked at the packed doors, at the crowds of stoic Mexicans in the windows; looked at his watch, walked to the bar again. He gave the impression of walking up and down the sawdust like a bear in a circus arena.

Along the benches on the side of what usually served as the dance floor there sat approximately seventy-five wallflowers. No, they were not the cantina girls. They were breeds, greasers, outlawed cowmen from other countries—with sombreros, shoulder holsters, and carbines. It was Jonlee's army.

The only trouble was that, no matter how well they oiled their guns, or how many cartridges they stuck in their holsters, that fierce-looking crew of renegades seemed strangely impotent. For there was

nothing for them to shoot. The whole business of this new nation being born was something terrifyingly mysterious. Not a clew to its conception, except the fact that Wynkoop, the barber, had announced himself as running for election.

This had had a peculiar effect on Jonlee: it was the effect that a mouse has on an elephant.

The little barber was the humblest of mankind. Always smiling, always frightened. Whenever Jonlee had entered his shop to be shaved, the barber acted as if he expected Jonlee might step on and squash him, as an elephant might squash a mouse.

But an elephant, it will be remembered, has a definite dislike to a mouse.

"If that snivelin' little wart thinks he kin set himself up as a president," Jonlee said to his chief henchman, the barkeep, "then every half-breed Wallapai in town will think the same thing."

The barkeep—a squat man with massive shoulders, from which his head seemed to grow without a neck—vouchsafed his opinion of the whole situation."

"These Mexes and breeds here are all sot on changin' their governments from the time they're born. Look what's happenin' every day over to Sonora County. I reckon some one's goin' to horse into this town with the same intents and purpose. And it behooves us, chief, to get prepared for same!"

"Prepared?" Jonlee repeated miserably. "Don't this look like I'm prepared?" He waved a giant arm toward the two rows of wallflowers.

The barkeep scratched the three curves of fat which joined his chin to his chest.

"Look here, chief," he said, "you ain't scairt?"

"Scairt—hell!" Jonlee snorted. "What I'm worryin' about is having so much cash in our bank." The fact was Jonlee had just sold the U. J. Silver Mine to a Tucson firm, and inasmuch as there had been something shady about the transaction Jonlee had specified that payment was to be made in cash.

"Don't worry about your cash, chief," his henchman said. "Ain't no one can break into that bank. The danger is that this here crowd may turn ag'in' you. Which I'm advisin' in order to get 'em feelin' kind of friendlylike toward you, that you invite every coot out thar to belly the bar and have a drink on the house. And then treat 'em agin, which if you keep it up for half a dozen rounds, you'll have 'em all yelpin' 'Long live Jonlee!'"

The cattle king studied the barkeep's red moon face. A drink emboldened him. It also cooled him off enough so that he made a very rapid incisive calculation.

He estimated the crowd—including his armed renegades—at about three hundred in all. Half a dozen drinks, times three hundred, at four bits a drink. That made nine hundred dollars.

If he had balked at paying a poker debt of five hundred, he was not the kind of man who would squander nine hundred on a saloon town rabble.

"Do you think I'm daft?" he snorted. "If that gang of gallumpin' jaybirds is thirsty—let 'em buy their own drinks!" He started to pace the floor again, mumbling: "This whole business is a joke, anyway—started by a measly little barber. Wait till I catch that seedwart! I'll give him a new kind of shave!"

"Chief," his henchman said, "it ain't the barber which started this game. I've figured it's some one else. Which you won't believe me, but I know because I've et at the very place that these placards come from They're just plain chow menus which you'll see same stuck up in a certain hot dog stand in this town which is called Horner's chowcart!"

Jonlee let out an oath.

"It's that gal!" he cried. "Barton's gal! She's a waitress at Horner's. And she's had it in for me ever since I started shinin' up to her."

A barber and—a little gal—and a few chowcart signs! Never in all of his gunfights had Jonlee been called upon to face such a strange combination.

And the barkeep seemed to be just as miserable and helpless.

"If we could only lay our hands on somethin'," he muttered, "I'd feel better. Here we are waitin' with seventy-five men

who're all well-heeled—and nary a thing for 'em to shoot!"

"Get the gal!" Jonlee suggested.

"The gal! What-all are you goin' to do with her? Cain't shoot *her!*"

"I can ax her a few impolite questions regardin' these here placards which they're wrote on her menus."

The barkeep swept the mahogany, his face frowning. "I don't advise no such proceedin's, chief."

"You ain't here to advise," retorted Jonlee. "All you are is my aide-de-konk which same takes advice, but don't give it."

A squad of men was delegated to search the town. They started out under command of a grizzly looking ape-man, whose one ear gave ample evidence of his past activities as a brander. The crowd at the swinging door of the cantina parted to let the squad march through.

But in the lane that widened a certain person put in an appearance, which made the prescribed duty of this squad of breeds null and void.

In short, it was Nell Barton herself.

"Holy cripes!" the corporal, the captain, the barkeep, and Jonlee cried.

The latter looked again at his watch.

It was half past eleven.

He went toward the girl. And she met him in the middle of the dance floor.

"Good evening, Mr. Jonlee," she said.

The cantina had never been so quiet, I venture to say since its opening night, fifty years before, in the bonanza mining days of Mule Town's history.

"How come you're honoring me with this visit, ma'am," Jonlee inquired, smarting under that smile of hers, "when you ain't never set foot in here before?"

"I've come here to invite all the citizens of Mule Town to rally around Tom Colby when he comes, and to help him right all the wrongs you've committed, Mr. Jonlee."

"Oh, you have! You're goin' to see this here 'republic' as you calls it, bein' erected!"

"I am."

"Well, then, might you'll be able to explain to me just how come these announcements of the republic was wrote on your chowcart menus?"

"Because the writing took place in my chowcart," she answered. "And I was the one delegated to stick them up!"

Jonlee's neck veins swelled. He didn't propose to stand before his whole gang, and be made sport of by this little sagehen.

He took her wrist in the grip of a huge paw and yanked her toward him.

"If you think you're goin' to come Injun on me, you little minx, I'll—"

"Careful there, chief!" the barkeep cautioned. The barkeep was well schooled in the chivalry of Western cantinas.

"Careful! Careful, hell! I know what I'm doin'. I been after this little jane—as a gentleman for a good long while, and she's laughed me off. Well and good. From now on I ain't a gentleman no more. And you ain't to be treated like a lady. You've started my men ag'in' me—which is the same as declaring war. War it is! From now on, you're my prisoner."

He took her up in his arms. There was a grumble from the windows and the crowded doors. The grumble even echoed in the big shack itself.

"Shank, git them manacles," Jonlee said to his barkeep.

The barkeep put up the big red hams that were his hands—and shook his head. "I'm advisin' ag'in' this, chief!"

Jonlee was about to hand the girl across the bar—like a big man picking up a child. But Shank would not receive her. Noting this first indication of mutiny in the one man he trusted, Jonlee drew his gun.

"Put that steel on her wrists, Shank, or I'll put some lead into your fat carcass."

Shank cringed. He put his hand under the bar where he kept the necessary paraphernalia of Mule Town law and order.

The girl was sitting on the bar where Jonlee had lifted her. And she was now rubbing her wrist.

Shank held the manacles across to her. The chivalry of a Western barkeep was bred deep in blood and bone. To touch her was sacrilege.

"Here you, gal, put these consarned things on yourself. I ain't goin' to have anything to do with it!"

He thrust the manacles into the girl's hand. Jonlee's eyes bulged. Was his best

friend going to sagebrush him at a time like this?

"It's the unwrote law, chief!" Shank begged.

Jonlee brought out his gun. The whole crowd in doorways, windows, along the side of the dance hall, saw their cattle king about to blow out the brains of his leading henchman.

But in that fraction of a second which elapsed between the lifting of a gun and the downward movement when the trigger is squeezed, something happened.

What had seemed for the moment the growling of the crowd developed into a rumbling, which was not so much like the voice of men as the growling of a herd of cows that is about to stampede. This lasted no longer than a few seconds, for immediately there was a screech as of braked wheels on steel rails.

There came a thunderous crashing of boards. Then before any one knew what it was all about, the whole wall behind Shank and his bar bulged inward, rows of bottles fell, shattering.

The wall opened, and a dump-car of the U. J. Mine rolled in on the sawdust covered dance floor. Its weight made the old floor sag. And as it heaved up against the opposite wall—which had cleared miraculously of all signs of "wallflowers"—it crashed part way through and stopped.

Another dump-car immediately behind it went through the same performance. And another, from the sides of which a formidable array of carbines protruded, sailed across the bar—to carry out a nautical figure—and luffed up alongside of the front entrance.

There was not a man near the front door by this time. The street was stampeded with Jonlee's renegades—a good many of whom had dropped their guns in terror.

Inside the cantina half the "army" of Jonlee was corraled in one corner of the dance hall. One terrified breed lifted his gun and was firing—a ridiculous procedure, like King Canute bidding the tide of the sea recede! Another renegade took up the cue and still another. For a moment there was a wild fusillade of shots—aimed at three dump-cars!

And it was to view this nonsensical procedure on the part of his army that Jonlee awoke: he had been knocked down by the fall of the bar, and now sat dazed, terrified, gathering his widely scattered senses.

Where he was he didn't know. How could he tell! It looked like the freight yard of the U. J. Silver Mine! The wall of his gaming-room was gone, admitting a glow of moonlight. The hanging lamps of the room seemed to be sailing about his head like fireflies.

Sharp streaks of light were coming from one car. A fusillade of deafening whiplike cracks shot out from the other side of the room. He saw two of his men fall—another drop his carbine and lurch toward the door.

He heard a voice cry out from somewhere: "Claw the air—every hombre in the house!"

He saw all his men drop their guns. And then there arose like a jack-in-the-box—a tall, gaunt figure from one of the cars, who towered over the scene, triumphant.

Jonlee tried to stand up. In his ears there still seemed to ring a deafening detonation as of many cannon. But he knew intuitively that a silence had settled upon the scene, upon the gaming-room—upon the whole town; a silence that had never been equaled in the remotest fastness of the Soda Mesa Desert. The walls—what there was left of them—seemed to be spinning like a merry-go-round.

Then he remembered. The gaunt figure up there—whose head seemed cut off by the shadow of the tin fan of the hanging lamp—was a man he had met before. It was a man who had faced him not long ago on this very floor, and challenged him to fight.

Jonlee stood swaying, his eyes bulging and inflamed. The desperate feeling of a man—of a king whose kingdom is now taken from him—gripped him. He snapped to his holster.

It was empty. Yes, of course—his gun had been knocked out of his hand when the catastrophe came.

He felt as if a hundred muzzles were pointing at his temples—all peering between the side boards of those cars. He realized that he was the only one who hadn't raised his hands. He lifted them.

And when he lifted them, a pair of handcuffs clicked about the thick, hairy wrists.

As a matter of fact only one gun muzzle had been pointing at him—and it was held by the slender freckled hand of a girl.

And the handcuffs which bound him were the very handcuffs which he had ordered put about that same girl's wrists.

As far as Jonlee was concerned, the Bar-J Republic had come in with a blaze of glory!

VI.

THE piping voice of Wynkoop arose like the soft call of the Inca dove after a desert windstorm.

"I been delegated to give a speech, gents!" he said.

Shank, the barkeep, crawled out of the débris of bottles and boards. He had a six-gun and conceived the desire to raise it against this orator. But he gave no evidence whatsoever of carrying out such a desperate impulse.

Instead, seeing the Jonlee army standing silent, with raised arms, he discreetly dropped his gun to the floor, raised his hands and listened to the orator.

The latter had an air which gave him a certain mastery.

He was standing on a dump-car, and this lent his diminutive figure height. He was likewise backed by a gunman whose face the barkeep remembered very clearly. Furthermore, there was something impressive about this barber with pomaded curls and fox eyes assuming a presidential dignity!

In a word everybody in the room listened attentively. And the crowd outside that began to gather at windows and doors listened attentively likewise.

"Gents," began the orator on the dump-car, "this rumpus looks like a raid—and such it was. But I'd like to announce to the whole of Mule Town—and to all the ranchers or muckers that has a grievance ag'in' Jonlee—that it ain't a raid in no wise or shape. But instead it's what you might call the birth of a nation. Which I'm goin' to invite you all to join same! This here being our new flag." He unfurled a bit of bunting with the Bar-J brand.

"It's the brand which all the cattle on this range has had run onto 'em," said the speaker. "And it's to signify that we ain't here to change no brands. We ain't here to rustle no cows, nor to take away no property. Jonlee keeps everything which it's rightfully hisn. But any stockman here who's been drove off his own cattle run or had his beeves rustled—well, he gits back what's rightfully hisn likewise!"

The crowd in the doorways and windows edged in.

"And, last, but not least, I git the poker debt which he didn't pay same that night when he give me a hundred thousand pesos in paper money!"

Some of the crowd on the outskirts cheered in muffled voices.

The next step of the barber might be termed a *coup d'état.*

"Now, then, gents, any of you who wants to bear arms in this cause, come up and take a drink. And when you drink, remember you're pledgin' the Bar-J Republic!"

"Come on, men, let's belly the bar!" some one called from outside.

"There ain't no bar to belly," another shouted.

"Don't matter!" the orator called. "Come in every one who's with us, and Shank will see that you git your swig!"

A large crowd of ranchers and prospectors moved in like a tide. They came through the door and windows.

They were the men whom Jonlee had dispossessed or persecuted. They were men he had licked. Men who for the sake of wives and children had acknowledged themselves licked. Men without a leader.

But what a change had come over them!

Jonlee's own renegades—such as had been lucky enough to clear out—had leaped to their cayuses and were now galloping down the main street of the town for the desert.

"All righto, Shank!" the provisional president — the whilom barber — cried. "Set 'em up—as many rounds as they'll hold. They're pledgin' a sacred cause!"

Shank cast a forlorn glance at his master, who had flopped into a chair—a miserable and shrunken giant with manacled hands.

"Here goes a nine-hundred-dollar round of booze, chief!" Shank wailed. But there was a sort of malignant triumph in his voice. His chief had begrudged that treat scarcely half an hour before.

"Step lively now, Shank!" the barber ordered. "It 'll all be paid for—every cent!"

Shank could do nothing but obey.

"Come on, Juan—come on, Pablo!" he called to two of his assistants. "Give me a hand here. Tap any keg that ain't been smashed. Pick up all the bottles that's got a drop of liquor left in 'em. Work fast!"

The demolished bar was propped up on two tables.

It was immediately surrounded by a thirsty and excited crew. At the first pledge the yipping began: "Long live the re-public! Down with Jonlee! Long live the president of the Bar-J!"

The barber climbed up to the dump-car again, where the most commanding figure of the whole scene still stood with a six-gun in each hand.

"How about the election now, pard?" Wynkoop whispered to Tom Colby.

"The election? No, wait! Plenty of time for that!"

"But how can we have a republic with-out we have a president?"

The power behind the throne—or I should say the power behind the presiden-tial chair—stepped down from his dump-car. He put away one of his weapons—and picked up another, which in some re-spects was far more formidable. It was the carpetbag of Jonlee's paper pesos.

"How much do we owe for this round of drinks, barkeep?"

Shank scratched his touseled hair. He was a quick thinker—and a shrewd busi-ness man. "You mean includin' the bot-tles which you busted 'em when you horsed in here?"

"Everything. Make your own price."

"Everything — including the smashed wall—and the bar, too?"

Shank looked over again at his chief, who was the most demolished looking bit of fur-niture in the whole cantina.

Jonlee, however, seemed to be listening to this palaver with a touch of new life.

Shank made bold to call the bluff of the dread invader.

"How about two thousand dollars, pard?"

"Does that include the busted floor?"

"Well, hardly, mister," the shrewd Shank qualified. "Three thousand is more like it."

"Here's your money," said Tom Colby, reaching into the carpetbag and extract-ing a roll of bills.

"You mean you're payin' with that thar phony paper?" Shank said hoarsely.

"Do you object?"

"Oh, no! Not me! I ain't objectin' to anythin' you do, mister."

"It's the currency of the Bar-J Repub-lic!" Wynkoop announced. "And we'll all have another drink—the whole house here and now."

Shank and his chief exchanged glances that were pregnant with chagrin and de-feat, while the cheers and yipping of the cowboys rose to a deafening roar.

The barber, seeing the complete success of this political gesture, sidled up to his master again:

"Look here, pard, I figure it's a good time to elect myself president. What-all's the sense of waitin'? This here republic ain't goin' to last overnight!"

"You're right there, pard," Tom Colby rejoined. "But when a republic is over-thrown—the president generally does a tight-rope act."

"Holy cripes!" the barber cried. "I never thought of that!"

VII.

Some might say that the events of Mule Town that night amounted to nothing more than an ordinary raid. A gunman from the desert, a waitress from a chowcart, and a barber held up the town and forced the cattle king, Jonlee, to right the wrongs he had perpetrated.

But others might say rightly enough—without stretching a point too far—that the Bar-J Republic actually had a brief span of existence between midnight and dawn.

And no one could deny that the chief raider—Tom Colby—set up a barber for a

president, and nobody dared to object. In fact, from the moment that Wynkoop was nominated and inaugurated by a speech out in front of Jonlee's cantina, a hilarious demonstration started and made the street a bedlam all through that night.

The Mexican posadas which lined one side of the street basked in the glory of the new régime. And the cantinas on the other side, Jonlee's, the Silver Queen, the Grand Hotel, the Frontier Dance Pavilion, were riotous until sunrise.

I mean by this that the mechanical pianos, the Spanish stringed quartets, the Texas Tommy and faro ran at full blast. But as for the bars—well, they were deserted. Why pay four bits when you could get all you wanted at Jonlee's for nothing? Nothing, that is to say, except the utterance of a few words pledging the fact that you were a citizen of the Bar-J Republic.

While Wynkoop, the barber, was being carried on the shoulders of some cowboys down the street, a procession followed which included the erstwhile ruler, Jonlee, with Colby as his private guard. When they had paraded the thoroughfare they stopped in front of the courthouse. I mean by this, the edifice which was to serve as courthouse for the Bar-J Republic.

It was nothing more than a long, narrow shack, sandwiched in between two of the cantinas—a space that was too narrow for a dance hall, too long for a chile-and-beans stand. In a word, it was a shooting gallery.

The door was closed to the mob, upon the scene that was to be enacted there.

Tom Colby and his factotum, the barber, and the girl presided as a tribunal. A firing squad was recruited from Jonlee's own little "army" of renegade breeds. Only Colby saw to it that their guns were unloaded—all save the gun of one man.

Jonlee was led in, tried and convicted.

The barber handed down the decision:

"I sentence you, Jonlee, owner of the Bar-J outfit, to be shot by the hand of your own professional cattle thieves."

"Who the hell are you—to do any sentencing?" Jonlee cried.

"I'm the court," said the barber. "And, likewise, the jury."

"I'd admire to know who appointed you."

"I myself," the barber shot back. "Bein' I'm the provisional president." He stuck his thumbs in his flowered velvet vest. "What there is in this here republic, I am! And what there ain't—that's you."

Jonlee began to be impressed. "You mean that you're goin' to stick me up and have me plugged like a dog?"

"Oh, no. You kin stand over there at the other end of this here shootin' arcade, with them clay ducks. You have the privilege of bein' blindfolded and kneelin' with your back toward us—in the Mex fashion—or else you kin stand up and face us. Same as a man—which you ain't."

Jonlee looked mournfully at Tom Colby. His face beaded. His lips were ashen.

"Is all this here straight, pard?" he cried piteously.

The girl came to his rescue. "We're carrying this too far!"

Tom Colby waited until the provisional president had ordered his squad of breeds to line up on one side of the counter of the shooting gallery.

"All right, hombre," said the president, "git down thar with them ducks."

Jonlee lifted his manacled hands to Tom Colby, and sank to his knees.

"Look here, pard," he pleaded, "this cain't be! Are you all daft? It's plain murder! Don't stick me up thar, I begs yer. Take the town and everything in it—and all the range—but don't stick me up and plug me!"

He looked frantically toward the firing squad—his own men.

"You ain't goin' to do this! You yaller-livered coyotes! You got guns—fight him! Don't stand there grinnin' at me. Ain't I always treated you right?"

"They can't put up much of a fight, hombre," Colby explained. "There's only one of those guns that is loaded—and they don't know which one."

Jonlee's face drooped as this last desperate appeal proved futile. Again he turned to Colby himself in whom, it was plain to be seen, the real power of the republic was vested.

"Pard, if you'll only leave me git out of

town—I'll do anything you say—no matter what, pard! I begs yer!"

"Git down with them ducks!" the president cried impatiently.

"No, wait!" Nell Barton interposed. She turned to Colby. "You can't be in earnest! This is plain murder."

Colby was indomitable. But the girl's intercession seemed to have a momentary effect.

"All right," he said. "It won't be done just yet. There's something which, in the excitement of all this shooting and speeches, and carousing, I'd forgotten all about."

Jonlee's face lit. Anything for time. "Yes, pard—go on, what is it?" he cried fervently.

"That carpetbag of pesos," said Tom.

"What about it?" the prisoner asked.

"You've got to redeem it."

"Redeem—a hundred thousand pesos? They ain't worth the paper they're wrote on!"

"They're worth a dollar apiece. That was the rate of exchange when you pawned them off on Wynkoop, the barber."

"You mean you want me to buy 'em—a dollar for every peso?" Jonlee cried.

"Do you prefer takin' your place with them ducks?" the provisional president asked.

Jonlee lifted his hands. "No, no, before God, pards, leave me go. You kin have what money there is in town—which it belongs to me. Every cent. But it ain't a hundred thousand."

"How about the cash for the sale of the U. J. Mine?"

"I didn't git cash," Jonlee cried. "It was a check. And you kin have the check."

"It's known by every one that you demanded cash—and that you stuck it in your own private bank, behind your cantina."

Jonlee whimpered. "How much do you want?"

"How much did you pay the barber?"

"A hundred thousand pesos—" Jonlee wailed. "Heaven have mercy!"

"That's how much we want—in good U. S. A. currency."

"I'll be damned if you'll git it!" the prisoner cried in a howl of desperation.

"All right, you greasers," the barber called to the squad of Mexicans as they waited, dumb, amused, puzzled behind the counter of the arcade. "Line up—same's if you was a firin' squad. And leave me state, clearly and concisely, that if Jonlee don't drop—you'll all drop instead. For me and my pard here are goin' to cover you while the execution gits under way."

"For God's sake, men!" Jonlee began again.

"The ducks is waitin', hombre," said the barber.

"Leave me have some time to think it over—"

"Time is the one thing this republic is short on," Tom replied. He turned to the firing squad. "Ready, hombres."

Jonlee was in tortured conflict. He looked down to the end of the arcade where he was to march to his death. The provisional president had in a spirit of grim humor, set the wheels of clay pipes revolving. The sight fascinated Jonlee.

What a death! What an ignoble end. To stand there and have his life shattered to a thousand bits—like a clay pipe! It was unthinkable.

"All right, gents, I'm beaten!" he said finally.

Colby gave another command to the squad. "As you were!" The guns were lowered. The Mexes stared with the same glimmer of quizzical intelligence on their flat brown faces.

"Leave one of them breeds go and git Shank, the barkeep," Jonlee said. "Shank knows the combination to my bank. Tell him it's ransom money, and to come through with every cent you ask for."

"All we'll ask for is a dollar to each one of these pesos," Colby rejoined. Then turning to the barber: "Pard, you go along and see Shank. Take the carpetbag. And let the townsfolk think you're still toting a wad of pesos."

"I'll attend to it, pard," Wynkoop said. "But might I better git a draft drawed on Jonlee's bank—by the old bird hisself?"

Jonlee agreed, writing a note to his chief henchman, Shank.

Just before the barber opened the big barnlike doors of the arcade to start on his mission, Tom Colby whispered to him:

"Once we get that carpetbag filled with Jonlee's real money the Bar-J Republic will start on its decline."

The barber's face fell. "Ain't we goin' to have a inauguration ball?" he asked in a tone of tremendous disappointment.

"Yes, but you and I and the girl won't horn in at the ceremonies. When you get that money, the next thing for you to do is to bring three good saddle ponies that can stand desert travel. My own horse is one; you get two more."

"You mean we're goin' to trail it into the Sody Mesa desert?" Wynkoop exclaimed.

Colby nodded. "Pronto, now. You know what happens to a president when a republic declines and falls!"

Wynkoop shook his little head in disgust. "Oh, this here president ain't forgettin' that point! No, sir!"

He hurried out on his mission.

VIII.

When Wynkoop had gone, the firing squad was ordered to stack guns and vamose. Colby, the girl, and the prisoner Jonlee were left in the arcade to while away a period of intense waiting.

Jonlee threw himself in a chair with a sigh of enormous relief. Colby walked up and down the narrow passageway, always armed and ready. A counter-revolution might be expected any minute. One of Jonlee's breeds might make so bold as to stick a gun muzzle at a crack in one of those warped board walls.

Nell Barton likewise waited in fearful apprehension. There could be many a slip between this cup—which was a hundred thousand dollars—and the lip—which was the contemplated escape to Soda Mesa desert.

Colby himself felt that Shank, the barkeep, might be inspired to play some trick when he parted with so much of his chief's money.

And that is what happened.

The barber returned with the carpetbag. As far as one could judge, that carpetbag was still stuffed with peso bills. No one out there in the carnival that was going on in the main street could have guessed that the barber was actually carrying a hundred thousand dollars in American money.

But Wynkoop's pointed little face was as alert and fear-ridden as a fox that is being hard pressed by hounds. He slipped in between the big doors, closed them, threw the carpetbag on the table. Then tragically:

"Pard, we've bit off more'n we can chaw."

Colby and Nell and even the prisoner saw that something serious was about to be divulged.

"Shank—he got good and ornery when he give me the money," the barber went on, hurriedly. He spoke under his breath so that the prisoner could not hear. "Shank—he wouldn't dast of said anything if it had been *you* stickin' him up for all this cash. But bein' it was only me, he unlocked the safe and counted out the money and give it to me, like he was heapin' coals on a fire that was goin' to burn me alive. And I ain't so sure but that's just what'll happen, chief!"

Colby laughed—as he glanced into the carpetbag and saw the treasure it contained. "What-all's got you, pard?" he asked. "Looks to me as if we've won the game!"

"But you ain't heard what's happened. Shank—he sent a rider up north of Puma Mesa to Fort Winfield. And he told me all about it, hissin' at me like a rattler. A troop of U. S. cavalry will be horsin' in here by to-morrow, and then we'll be asked how come we've set up a republic on United States territory?"

Tom and the girl looked at each other. Nell was pale.

"I knew we'd carried this too far," she said.

Tom turned to the barber again: "How about the three mounts?"

"Oh, I got them all righto!" the latter rejoined. "They're in the corral just behind my shack. Good fast ones, too. The vet, he helped me out. And I paid for 'em in cash! Ain't no time to lose, pard. Come on, gal. If we got to ride with a detachment of U. S. regulars on our trail I want a good day's start."

"You mean we're going to be outlaws?"

the girl asked. She gave the impression—despite the shocked and tragic note in her voice—that she would be anything, or trail anywhere—that Tom Colby commanded.

"Looks like you'll have to abdicate, Mr. President," Tom told the barber.

"Oh, I thought of that long before you did," said the latter.

"But I don't want to see the Bar-J Republic crumble the very night it started," Tom went on. "Which means, that we've got to have another president."

"As long as you say 'another'—it's quite jake with me," rejoined Wynkoop.

Tom Colby looked over at the prisoner, who was sitting morose and silent, eagerly but futilely trying to catch something of what was being said. When Tom went up to him, he flinched as if expecting some new mode of torture.

"Hombre, before I let you go, I'm going to make a dicker with you," Tom said. "I don't figure you're overanxious to have me stay in town. Well, in return for freeing you I want you to get up on the board sidewalk outside this shooting arcade and announce to the street that the barber has abdicated the presidential chair. Likewise that I myself, Colby, am going to leave town, taking with me this girl. That ought to satisfy you."

Jonlee wiped his brow. It was a gesture of enormous relief.

"I ain't objectin' to you vamosin' right now," he vouchsafed.

"Very well, then. "It's up to you to make a speech to your gang ordering them to let us go in peace."

Jonlee darted a queer look at the three people who had overthrown him.

"How-all do you expect me to give 'em orders when they think it's a republic—and me havin' no more power?"

"That's just the point we've got to clear up first," Colby explained. "I'm giving you back your power—only on one condition: that instead of ruling over this range as a cattle king, you rule as a president."

Jonlee stared out of his faded blue eyes. "What sort of a sagebrushin' trick are you pullin' off now?" he cried.

"Wynkoop, the barber, is going to get up there first, gather the crowd, make his speech, abdicate as president, and you're to follow."

"You mean I'm to be appointed president—and of this here phony game you call a republic? Do you think I'm daft?"

"They didn't think *we* were daft!" Colby rejoined.

Jonlee sneered. "That's because you got 'em all soused on my liquor."

"They're still sousin'," the barber put in. "What they want is a president—and here's a chanst for you to be boss again."

Jonlee grinned as he turned this over in his mind. A moment before, he was about to be shot down by a firing squad. Now he was about to be elected a president. It was some sort of a joke. But he couldn't see the point. Nor could he object to it.

Ridiculous as it seemed, such things happened. Even a barber had been a president that night. Why not the great Jonlee? Besides he had enough understanding of mob psychology to know that if he could get back some vestige of power for just one moment, he would be able to finish this queer play according to his own desire.

"Go on, gents," he said. "Whatever your game is, I'll stay in for the show-down."

"You cain't help but do much else," commented the barber as he opened the swinging door and stood out on the board sidewalk.

Jonlee and the girl and Colby stood behind him. It was to be a show-down. No doubt about that. Every one in the street sensed the coming climax—as soon as they saw those four people together outside the shooting arcade.

Mexicans, cowboys, Papagoes, breeds, barkeeps, muckers came flocking from all corners of the street. The dance halls, the gaming parlors, even Jonlee's cantina itself, were emptied.

Wynkoop, provisional president, was speaking:

"Gents, citizens, pards! I've got somethin' to say which it's goin' to be said quick and clear. This here Bar-J Republic has proved such a huge success that I figure you'll all be wantin' some one to head it that's more'n just a plain ordinary tonsorial artist. You'll want a man who owns

a lot of range and a lot of cattle and a lot of Mule Town real estate. You'll want a man who has proved hisself in the past a ruler.

" My job as provisional president is over —and I done a good job if I do say so myself. But after all I kin make more use outen a barber's chair than a presidential chair. So I hereby abdicate. And if you'll agree I'll appoint a man to take my place, as that'll save a lot of election expenses, as well as some gun-shootin'."

A deathly silence. Men stared at each other.

" So bein' they's no objection," Wynkoop went on, " I appoint as the first real president of the Bar-J Republic the same bird as owns the Bar-J brand in the first place. He ruled over you as a cattle king before, but now he ain't goin' to be a tyrant nor rule over nobody. He's just goin' to be a president—and have the rights and power which is give' him—to use a couple words which Tom Colby, my pard, has made up—by the *vox populi!*"

" Whatever that means we don't know," some in the crowd cried. " But who are you electin'?"

" I'm electin' no other than our friend Jonlee—the rightful owner of the Bar-J brand."

There was a dead silence at this, then an ominous growl.

But Jonlee proved himself equal to the crisis. He stepped forward, held up his big hand, shoved his sombrero to the back of his rusty red hair.

The growling ceased. Every one seemed to realize that the destiny of Mule Town and its citizens hung in the balance.

" Gents," Jonlee began, " what this here tonsorial seedwart has announced is no more'n the truth. You don't want a barber for a leader. And when you're all sober you'll believe me. What you-all want is a fightin' man—"

" Who'd *you* fight?" some one called out.

Jonlee flushed. But the knowledge that the most dangerous man in town—Tom Colby—was on his side, seemed to invest him again with his former bullying dignity.

" Don't any one say anything till I'm through!" he ordered. " Don't anybody cause a disturbance, unless they want their chins lifted out into the Sody Mesa desert. I'm here again—as owner of the brand! I don't only have my own men to fight for me—which got scairt at a dump car or two crashin' through a wall. But I likewise got the government of the Bar-J Republic behind me."

The silence in the street was miraculous. The old fear-sway of Jonlee seemed to have been resurrected in the blink of an eye, in the speaking of a word! And there was Tom Colby himself—the author and finisher of the whole game, standing behind the bully and tyrant, and letting him assume again his old-time power!

It was mysterious; it was incomprehensible; it was unbeatable. No man knew how to buck it. They were again without a leader—except for the tyrant Jonlee himself.

Jonlee went on with compelling suavity: " And, gents, I'm here to announce to one and all, that the Bar-J Republic exists and that I'm the president of same, and that from now on, every citizen of it as will call me president will git free drinks whenever he wants 'em at my cantina, and will be give' a good horse as a bonus, and git a claim in any part of my range he wants to stake off."

This was something of a political maneuver which Tom Colby and the barber had not foreseen. Jonlee, in a word, had proved himself a mob leader far beyond their wildest dreams. Of course, no one with any sense would believe such glorious promises on the part of the well-known skinflint of Mule Town—but a mob, collectively, will believe anything, as no one will deny.

Tom Colby, in fact, knew instantly that it was a good time for him to get out of town—and to get his girl and his barber, and his carpetbag out with him.

He put one arm about the girl's shoulder and stepped back with her into the recess of the arcade.

Almost instantly Jonlee slipped down into the mob, snatched the gun from the holster of one of his old cronies, and ducked behind a fat Papago squaw who had drifted into the vortex of the mob.

" Gents," he cried out at the top of his

lungs. "My first duty as president is to order the execution of this here stranger from the desert who came in to rustle our whole town away from us!"

Tom Colby had drawn his gun. In the milling of that gang of Mexicans and Indians and herders below him, he tried to find a good aim at Jonlee.

Instinctively, however, he knew that the moment he fired upon that mob, he himself would be the center of a fusillade. For Jonlee had played his part well. With the girl in his arms, Colby knew he could take no such risk as to fire.

Instead of waiting to call the show-down then and there, he slammed the big doors of the arcade shut.

Inside, he found himself with the girl—and with Wynkoop, the barber, who had slipped in, as a dog will slip in ahead of you whenever you enter a door—and no matter how quickly you close it.

There they were—while the barnlike doors of the shooting gallery were being splintered by a sudden fusillade of lead.

"Take her back there," Colby cried to the barber. "Sneak out to your shack when you have the chance, mount your horses and get out of town."

Wynkoop did not stay to object. His first impression—which was perhaps true enough—was that Tom Colby could give the whole town a good fight for its money.

But Nell Barton objected: "How about you?"

"I'll fight 'em off till I know you're on your mounts—then I'll follow."

Practically dragging the girl by the hand, Wynkoop rushed down the narrow floor of the shooting gallery toward the targets of ducks and clay pipes.

When they reached there, the pipes began to fly into little bits, the boards to splinter, the glass of the window to crash.

"They's a gang out here," Wynkoop called back to Tom. "I guess we're caught, pard."

From outside there was a continual volley of shots from Jonlee's gunmen, which sounded like a pitched battle. Colby put out the one lamp. Bullets began to whistle overhead, to crash through the warped walls at the lower end.

"Shove those targets up against that window," Colby called. "I'll watch this end. Get down low, girl. Wynkoop, flatten against that wall, and keep firing."

Wynkoop crawled to the lower end of the arcade. Colby watched the other. The siege—which was to take much longer than Jonlee anticipated—had begun.

IX.

When the sun slanted its rays across Puma Mesa that dawn, it illuminated a memorable but not entirely unusual scene in Mule Town's history.

A good part of the main street was deserted. But at either end a crowd of townspeople stood viewing, at very close quarters, a gun battle. From the doors and windows of the shacks on the Mexican side of the street, frightened faces peered out—squaws, *señoritas*, cantina girls—and white-haired greasers. In the freight yard of the United Jack Silver Mine a crowd of men was gathered behind dump cars, shacks, mounds of slag.

Back of a water trough in the street were two men—Jonlee and his barkeep. Other of Jonlee's gunmen were hidden in points of vantage, continuing a spasmodic fire. A wounded man was being carried into Jonlee's cantina. Another was being tended in the office of the U. J. Mine—a door of which opened into the freight yards.

"It's no use, chief," Shank, the barkeep, said to his master, as they were crouched behind that water trough. "Any man fool enough to crawl close will git plugged."

"Wait till it gits brighter and might be we'll catch a glimpse of one of 'em in that thar window."

They looked toward Puma Mesa—a giant block of shadow. One of its walls had already turned into an etching of black shadow and red abutments of granite and quartz. Long bands of sunlight slanted across this steep façade, illuminating the whole landscape of sage plain, desert and the little cowtown.

And as Jonlee and his henchmen looked eastward they saw, riding down the alluvial fan at the base of Puma Mesa, a long file of horsemen.

"What in tarnation's that?" Jonlee exclaimed.

Shank's beetling brow knitted as he scowled into the light. Presently he shook his head dolefully and swore.

"It's trouble! That's what it is!"

Jonlee looked. For all he knew it might have been a band of renegade Papagoes; in which case he would not have been very much concerned.

But they were riding in a more or less well defined file. Even though they were black silhouettes, Jonlee could see that they were not scattered as any ordinary desert band might have been.

"What-all do you mean when you say trouble, Shank?" he asked.

"Ain't no other word for it. It wouldn't of meant trouble last night—afore you pulled that speech about bein' president, and gettin' every breed and mucker in town to call you president. They'll all swear to it now—bein' you made all them fool promises."

"What's that got to do with these riders?" Jonlee asked.

"A powerful lot! Them's U. S. cavalrymen."

Jonlee scowled again into the light. "I'll be damned if they're U. S. cavalrymen! How do you know it?"

"For the simple reason that I sent for them."

"*You sent for them!* Well, of all the half-witted sheep ticks I ever did see! Sent for U. S. regulars to horse in here! Holy cripes!"

"When I sent for 'em, you was bein' fleeced of a hundred thousand dollars—and you was just about to be plugged by a squad of your own Mexes! That's why I sent for 'em! And now I figure you'll break my bones for tryin' to help you! Well, I cain't blame you. Them soldiers will ax you to explain a thing or two about how come you're the president of a republic in this here U. S. A."

Jonlee's eyes bulged as he looked at the barkeep's tragic face.

"Damn your hide, Shank—it wasn't *me* that got up this fool joke about a republic. It was Colby and a barber—sage-brushin' a bunch of drunken herders."

"Oh, yes—they got it up all righto. But who do you reckon they'll ax for first? A barber? Wow—that's good! A president—that's who they'll ax for! And you'll have to tip your hat to 'em and say, 'Here I am, colonel or major, or whatever he is. Here I am, the president of the Bar-J. How come you're invadin' my republic?'" Shank swore dolefully. "A fine rodeo this is goin' to turn out as. With you doin' the chief calf-ropin' ack! Which I ain't goin' to be the calf myself. I'm shaggin' out. *You* kin stay and be the calf!"

Shank had the whole situation sized up clearly enough. He slipped his six-gun back into its holster and crawled off toward the shelter of the cantina. Then, when well out of the range of the possible fire from the arcade, he broke into a run. He was watched by a hundred pairs of eyes; but no one understood the actual purport of this sudden retreat.

Nor could any one understand why Jonlee himself retreated. They saw him clearly enough, crawling at first—keeping the trough as a shield against that arcade, then coming to his feet and breaking into a run. They saw him follow Shank to a corral near the Jonlee cantina, where they leaped to their horses and galloped off without a word to any of their fellow besiegers.

The men who, under Jonlee's leadership, had maintained that futile fire for such a long time, were as much at a loss to know what had happened as any of the Mexican onlookers.

Sure enough, here were some horsemen riding down from Puma Mesa. But why should this inspire so much fright? Whatever the cause, there was no more use crouching behind dump cars and water troughs and in the doorways of shacks, hoping to shoot Colby—or the barber.

With the flight of Jonlee and his partner, the besiegers retreated—cautiously at first, then running across the open spaces for shelter in the near-by doorways.

For a moment a good part of the U. J. freight yard was empty and well out of range.

This was the situation when Colby and the girl and little Wynkoop made their break for liberty.

The detachment of cavalry was riding toward the first shacks on the outskirts of town; the shooting arcade which had been the center of activity for so many hours was as devoid of human touch as if quarantined by some deadly power; the Mexicans on one side of the street, the cowboys and muckers on the other, were waiting in complete bafflement; Jonlee and his partner were riding like mad for a trail that led up into the Sierra.

And only a moment later Tom Colby, the girl, and Wynkoop were mounted on their horses, which had been waiting all night for them in a walled-in corral behind the barber shop. And now these three were heading for the desert trail.

Nor was there a man in the whole of Mule Town who had the desire—or the stomach—to pursue them.

X.

At the head of the detachment from Fort Winfield rode a lean, gray-bearded veteran Indian fighter and frontiersman, Major Joseph Parkers, U. S. A. Although he and his men had made the journey over the plains in the most convenient time of traveling—the few hours before and during dawn—they were well tuckered out, their horses lathered; their throats parched with alkali dust.

The troop was met by all of Mule Town, who came out from doors and from between buildings, and from behind hiding places, like a mob of actors in a drama.

But the major could find no leader or spokesman in the rabble of Mexicans and cowboys and muckers that surrounded his horsemen. Jonlee and his *aide de camp,* the barkeep, were gone. Colby and his aide, the barber, were gone. And so was the girl, who might have been able to answer a few questions.

As it was, the only ones left were the citizens of the Bar-J Republic, who were puzzled enough about these affairs of state. One thing, however, was uppermost in the mind of every one of them: the fact that Jonlee had promised a claim and a horse and free drinks to any man who acknowledged him president.

"What-all kin we do for you, major?" one man in the crowd—the veterinary—asked.

"I want to find out what you bullwhackers mean running your brand on a flag—and sticking it up instead of the Stars and Stripes," the grizzled old frontiersman snapped. "And I want to find out who's got the nerve to call this cow country down here a republic—when you're American citizens. By Heaven, I've a good mind to run you across the border for the bunch of measly Mex revolutionists you are!"

"'Tain't us, major," the veterinary said placatingly. "We ain't done nothin' all night 'cept drink. Ain't a man of us knew what it was all about."

"A rider came to the fort last night, saying a man had set himself up here as president of a republic. He's the man I want. Where is he? And who is he?"

A dozen voices lifted in reply:

"Jonlee—he's president!"

"Jonlee!" the major cried. "The damn yellow-livered bully! I've been laying for him for years—and at last I've got something to try him on."

"But it waren't Jonlee that started the republic!" some one called out. "It's them three riders that took the trail to Soda Mesa desert when you rode into town. They're the ones which paid for drinks with pesos—"

"Every one was circulatin' pesos when the night was over," the veterinary objected.

"Who in hell first put those pesos into circulation? That's the man I want!" the major cried.

"Jonlee—he done it! He done it—that night he paid the barber that poker debt."

No one could deny this—even though the major looked around for contradictory testimony.

"Where is this coyote Jonlee?" the major asked finally. "If Jonlee's brand is on the flag, and if he's the one who first passed those pesos, and if he's the president of this fool game you're callin' the Bar-J Republic, well and good. He's the man I want. It's a good case for court-martial."

A dozen hands pointed toward the sage plain that sloped up westward. "He's

ridin' that trail to the Sierra, with his sidekick, the barkeep."

"Come on, men!" the major called to his troop. "That settles it. He's our man."

The crowd parted as the troop, forming into twos, trotted their mounts down the street. From the creek bed which terminated the street at one end of Mule Town they rode on up the sage plain toward the Sierra.

Tom Colby drew rein at the crest of a loma, from which height he commanded a good view of the desert, the vast demesne of sage and buckeye, and the dun-colored cow town from which he and his companions had fled.

He observed clearly enough that the troop of horsemen who had entered the town a short time after the fugitives had left it were now headed for the Sierra. He saw clearly enough that between Mule Town and himself there was no one in pursuit.

He went down into the barranca where he had left Wynkoop and the girl. Wynkoop had dismounted and was opening the carpetbag.

The girl went to Colby, looking anxiously into his face.

"We're free," he told her. "It looks as if Jonlee's got to do all the explaining. There's no more danger for you in that town. You can go back if you wish. Unless you want to follow me to my diggings down there in the desert."

Nell Barton did not at first understand the serious purport of that choice he was making her take. But when he put out his hand and took hers, she looked up with a start.

Yes, he was asking her to choose between two trails—one that would lead back to the cow town, the other—to go with him—and this trail she must follow all her life.

"Your Bar-J Republic can fall," she said, "and so can your presidents—but you've still got me!"

"Ten—twenty—thirty—"

Wynkoop was dividing the bills into three equal parts. He took a bunch of them, stacking them and knocking them on his knees as if straightening a card pack. Then he wet his thumb.

"It's the way you counted 'em—when they waren't nothin' but pesos!" he said to Tom Colby. "Ten—twenty—thirty—Zowie, I sure thought you were daft countin' thataway. But it's a convenient way to count."

He tapped the pack on his knee again, wet his thumb, turned down the corners: "One hundred, two hundred, four, six, eight. That means a barber shop with mirrors on all walls and mirrors on ceiling—and mirrors to walk on, s' help me!" He had a third of the money counted, which he appropriated for himself. "Who wants to be president," he laughed, "when you kin be a barber in Tucson, Arizony?"

"No need to divide what's left," the girl told him. "Tom and I are pooling ours."

THE END

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"I Did It!"

By GARRET SMITH

Author of "On the Brink of 2000," "After a Million Years," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

WALLACE TOWNE, a young real estate agent, learns that Peter Laurette, his uncle, supposedly a poor farmer, has been found murdered, leaving him four hundred thousand dollars, and Marion Glover, his cousin, one hundred thousand dollars. Towne reaches his uncle's Adirondack farmhouse at midnight, finds the front door unlocked, and goes to bed. The next morning he finds a corpse lying face downward outside his door, with his own knife sticking between the shoulder blades. Marion comes out of the next room. When Towne speaks to her, she runs out of the house. He runs after her while Jim Holcomb, the hired man, reports the murder to Willis, local hotelkeeper and deputy sheriff. Willis and Chick Ball, a State trooper who investigated the first murder, arrive and find the corpse to be that of Peter Laurette, who, after all, wasn't killed when the first body was found. When they trail Towne and the girl, they find final trace of them at the edge of a quicksand in Deever's Swale, a near-by bog. All but Ball conclude that Wallace has murdered his uncle, and perished in trying to drown the girl. Chick finds Holcomb lying about his whereabouts on the murder night, and has him held as a material witness. Immediately Willis gets Ball removed from the case, and himself put in charge. When Ball returns to Deever's Swale at night, he hears Willis's posse drag something heavy from the swamp and dump it into their boat.

CHAPTER X.

SUPPRESSED EVIDENCE.

WILLIS had found the bodies. Ball was sure of that.

His first impulse was to make his presence known and demand the right to see the gruesome burden that the flat-boat was bearing away in the darkness over the waters of Deever's Swale.

But on second thought, he decided it would be unwise. He had no more official right in the case. Willis was acting entirely within his rights if he chose to continue his search in the dark. He would defy Ball and increase the friction between them.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 17.

He could gain nothing by striking in the open. By lying low and watching unsuspected, he would be much more likely to fathom the deputy sheriff's mysterious procedure. He picked his steps carefully along the margin of the swale. At the log trestle he confidently expected to find Willis's car waiting to receive the bodies.

But, though he felt his way back and forth over the trestle and for a considerable distance beyond at either end, he found no traces of a car and could hear nothing.

For an hour he watched and listened with no results. It was as though the miasmic swamp had swallowed up the flatboat and its gruesome burden. It was nearly midnight when he gave up his vigil and went back to the hotel.

After cleaning up a little, he went to Lockhart's room and, as he had hoped, found the newspaper man still up. His sybaritic form, clad in a red silk dressing gown, was stretched on the bed. He was nursing a well-ripened meerschaum pipe, and reading a volume of Schopenhauer.

"Well, how's the sick aunt?" he greeted.

But Ball was in no mood for facetiousness. Briefly, he reported what he had seen.

"You don't know whether they found both bodies?" the newspaper man asked.

"I suppose they must have got one before I came, because they quit as soon as they pulled up the one I saw. What I want to know is, why did they finish the job at night and do it on the Q. T.? I'm perfectly certain he stalled this afternoon and didn't make any real try at it while we were watching."

"You're right there, and I'll tell you what I think's the reason. I've got a hunch you were right in guessing they were worried for fear Jim Holcomb did the killing of all three."

"We'll know in the morning," Ball replied. "If Willis doesn't promptly report finding the bodies we can be pretty certain that Jim Holcomb is it. Our game then will be to lie low and give the gang plenty of rope. Then, when we've got all the evidence we need, we can spring the trap."

With that Ball went to his room, but not to sleep.

"I don't think I'll hang around Willis, to-day," Ball announced to Lockhart at breakfast next morning. "Suppose you run up and see if there's any more dragging of the swale. I suppose they'll have the inquest this afternoon. I'll have to be there, of course, but as soon's it's over, if nothing else breaks meantime, I'll set out on the trail of Jim Holcomb's midnight ride."

The forenoon passed without a word from Lockhart, that in itself an ominous sign. There was a hum of excitement over the tragedy among the summer residents in the big hotel. Ball stayed shut up in his room to avoid disagreeable questioning.

At noon there was a rush for the first edition of the New York papers which arrived on the twelve ten train. Ball secured a set and closely scanned the story Lockhart had sent out. It was a highly sensational, but in the main, accurate presentation of the version he and Ball had agreed upon. All the dangerous points had been skillfully handled. There was no hint at the friction between the State and local forces.

But Ball was interested mainly in the end of the story that had been dug up in New York City by the local newspaper men.

It seemed to answer the puzzle as to the mysterious appearance of Towne, the missing heir, after a month's silence.

At the time of the first murder, Lockhart, as a newspaper man, had taken it upon himself to help the executors in trying to ferret out the much-wanted Wallace Towne.

Beginning with what Towne had dropped regarding himself at the time of his brief visit to his uncle five years before, it had been comparatively easy to trace his past.

Towne had mentioned having been born in Schenectady, New York, and moving with his parents to Winnipeg, Canada, at an early age. Inquiries in those cities had verified this. In both cities he seemed to have a good reputation. When he finished school he had worked for various lumber companies in the Northwest. His mother had died about that time.

Then, just before his visit to his uncle, Peter Laurette, his father had died, leaving

him a few thousand dollars. Wallace Towne had resigned from a good job and left Winnipeg, announcing that he was going to see the world before settling down again. When he left Bruce Lake after his visit to his uncle he had mentioned to several of his new acquaintances there that he was on his way to Europe.

But quick work by enterprising newshounds in New York had reached back and touched some of the high spots in this five-year gap.

The first flash of Lockhart's story of this second genuine murder of Peter Laurette had been wired in to the metropolitan newspaper offices a little after six on a dull summer Sunday evening. With it he had sent both Towne's office and home addresses as found on envelopes in his pocket.

The reporters had interviewed his boarding mistress and fellow boarders. Invoking the police on the ground that Towne was a suspected murderer, they had broken into his office and studied his business correspondence. The name and address of his secretary had been found, and she had been located at her home.

Towne, they had learned, had spent four years knocking around the world sight-seeing, then he had settled in New York and, with the remainder of his little heritage, had gone into the real estate business. He was an agreeable young man, industrious, and apparently honest. But it had been a dull year. His secretary said it couldn't be more than a month at the outside before he would have to go into bankruptcy.

But in all Towne's history, there was no hint that he was of a criminal disposition.

The statement of Towne's secretary, as reported in the story, indicated pretty clearly that if Towne committed the murder it had not been premeditated.

"I am perfectly sure that up to ten o'clock yesterday morning he had no idea where he was to get even enough money for his pay roll," she was quoted as saying. "When things got so bad several weeks ago that he had to take me into his confidence, I asked him if he hadn't any relatives he could borrow some money from to tide him over till fall. He said he had only two living relatives in the world as far as he knew and they might both be dead now for all he had heard, and that, anyhow, they were both as poor as Job's turkey."

She then told of the call of Jones, the bond salesman, and how Towne had learned from him of his uncle's death and his inheritance.

All in all, Ball gleaned from this account of Towne, that whatever conspiracy might have surrounded this series of murders, Towne had no part in it, unless he became involved on the spur of the moment. Evidently, he had no connection with the first killing, that of the unknown man who had been mistaken for Peter Laurette.

Proving that Towne finally did kill old Laurette and Miss Glover would in no way solve the first mystery. Whether the second mystery was to be solved to-day would depend entirely on the report Deputy Sheriff George Willis had to give on the finding of the bodies in Deever's Swale.

As to what the report would be, Ball was not long left in doubt. Lockhart came back to the hotel to luncheon and slipped into Ball's room.

"Willis went on with the search for the bodies this morning," he whispered. "They worked like earnest young Trojans to-day; acted as though they really wanted to find something. They've had the gang beating the woods in every direction, too, but nothing doing. This noon Willis announced that the bodies must have worked downstream some distance in the ooze and finally sunk out of reach in the quicksand. So there you are."

"That means Jim Holcomb, with Willis and his gang as accessories!" Ball declared.

CHAPTER XI.

BALL IS BAFFLED.

ON the way to the inquest that afternoon, the two threshed over again the ground they had pretty well covered the night before when this action on the deputy sheriff's part was merely a bare conjecture.

"You've got enough evidence to make 'em a lot of trouble," Lockhart summarized. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I think I'll be just as clever in suppressing evidence as they are. I think it would please 'em only too well if I showed my hand just now. It would tip them off that I was on to something and they'd not only discredit me thoroughly, but get their tracks thoroughly covered before the trial came off."

"Do you think Coroner Brown himself is honest?" Lockhart asked.

"Oh, yes. I guess so. He's a rather able citizen, too, but he plays with the ring and does about what he's told. Sheriff Smith and District Attorney Green are in the same class. They'd all hate to actually stand for anything crooked, and they're always hopin' if anything crooked's goin' on they won't have to see it."

As it turned out, both Sheriff Smith and District Attorney Green were spectators at the inquest in the interest of their respective offices.

There was also present a keen-eyed little man who was a complete stranger to Ball and Lockhart. He proved to represent an unexpected bit of enterprise on the part of Coroner Brown. He was introduced as Mr. Zoller, a finger-print expert from a New York detective agency.

The coroner had summoned him by wire the night before, after a telephone conference with the district attorney.

As interested spectators, too, were the three executors of Peter Laurette's estate. They were respectively: Timothy Wheeler, a petty-fogging lawyer of Trevor Bend; Mortimer Selden, the village banker; and Horace Doran, keeper of the general store.

These three gentlemen had never been intimates of old Peter Laurette nor privy to his personal affairs. They had looked upon their appointment as a purely nominal one, and a rather whimsical fancy on the part of the testator.

They were as surprised as any one when they learned that they had a real fortune to administer. The job had become decidedly irksome when it developed that it involved a long drawn out search for a missing heir.

Now they were mixed up in a second murder mystery with the likelihood of having a half million dollar estate on their hands with no one to turn it over to. They heartily wished themselves clear of the whole affair.

The proceedings began, after establishing the identity of Peter Laurette, with Jim Holcomb's story. The usually garrulous hired man was for once painstakingly sparing in speech. He looked straight ahead of him, huge hairy paws on ungainly knees.

In the fewest possible words, sticking right to the point, he told the story of his night. He had the air of a man reciting something carefully committed to memory.

Ball could not catch him in a single statement that varied from the essential facts he had given in his rambling and broken account after the finding of the body on Sunday morning.

"What time was it when you got home from Willis's hotel, Holcomb?" the coroner asked.

"I dunno rightly. I ain't got a watch. I guess it was about nine o'clock."

"You swear you didn't leave the barn after that?"

"Only a minute when I went out to see'f Miss Glover was all right. That couldn't been more'n ten."

"What time do you think it was when you got up and saw Peter Laurette in the yard?"

"Maybe midnight, maybe later."

"You are positive the person you saw was Laurette?"

Holcomb hesitated a second.

"Wal, it looked like him."

"Had you ever doubted Laurette was dead since that first body was identified?"

"No, sir."

"Ever see signs that anybody had been prowling around the house or barn at night?"

"No, sir."

In examining Willis, the coroner had the hotel man confirm the time of Holcomb's arrival and departure at his place that evening.

"It seems clear from the statement in today's papers by Towne's secretary that Towne must have come in on the train due here at seven, but which was several hours late. Do you know just what time that train got in?"

"Yes. I was awake yet when I heard it. I struck a match an' looked at my watch. It was quarter to twelve."

"Then Towne might have arrived here at the house about the time Holcomb thinks he saw Laurette."

During Jim's and Willis's testimony, Ball caught Willis eying him furtively. The trooper surmised that the deputy sheriff was worried as to what he might have up his sleeve. He even saw the sheriff and district attorney cast speculative glances his way. When it came Ball's turn to testify there was an evident tenseness in the Willis group, and Jim Holcomb shifted nervously in his seat.

But Ball contented himself with a simple statement of the clews he had found about the house and premises, drawing no conclusions. Of his secret inspection of the barn, of course, he said nothing. His open and official inspection of the barn he dismissed briefly as of no importance.

Zoller, the finger-print expert, worried Ball as much as he evidently did Willis. Ball feared this man's finding might force his own hand prematurely, in case he found anything incriminating against Jim Holcomb.

But what he found only strengthened the evidence against Towne. The marks on the fatal knife blade, though faint, were unmistakably that of Towne, as proven by other finger marks of his found on his military brushes in the bedroom.

Zoller explained the faintness of these marks by pointing to Towne's blood-stained handkerchief that had been found about the knife.

"Probably," he explained, "the murderer, when he was interrupted by Mr. Holcomb, was trying to withdraw the telltale knife from the wound. As it had imbedded its point in a bone it was stuck pretty fast. Probably there were blood spatters on the knife blade, and he used the handkerchief to keep from getting blood on his hands."

"In your opinion, then, the knife thrust was made by the knife's owner, Towne?" the coroner asked.

"That I think is evident."

"And this knife belonged to Towne?"

"Evidently. His secretary in New York had seen it time and again. It is not a common knife, and she identified it from its description."

The handle of the blood-stained poker revealed nothing. It had been wrapped for a long time with a piece of coarse burlap bound on with twine to protect the hand from the heat when used in a fire. This material took no legible prints of the fingers that had grasped it.

The jury and the witnesses adjourned to the banks of the swale where Willis explained the thoroughness with which he had dragged for the bodies.

He explained how a body falling into the swale during a freshet such as on Sunday would drift for an incalculable distance down the augmented channel in the loose drifting silt, and eventually sink to unknown depths in the quicksand.

He illustrated the depth by pushing a twenty-foot pole straight down out of sight without striking a resisting bottom, though the water at that point was a scant foot deep.

It was testified that the strongest swimmer could not escape from that clinging slime. It was further pointed out that the only tracks found led straight in to one of the worst points in the slough.

Willis, in stating the number of hours that he and his aides had spent dragging the swale, omitted to mention any night work.

After they had returned to the house again and the coroner seemed about ready to leave the case with the jury, Coroner Brown suddenly turned to Ball again.

"There's one thing more I wanted to ask, Mr. Ball," he said. "When you were in charge of the case yesterday, you ordered the detention of this witness, James Holcomb, as a material witness. Will you explain to the jury the reason for that detention?"

Ball again felt himself under the scrutiny of several pairs of furtive eyes. He had expected some such question as this, however, and was ready for it.

"Oh, I was merely playing safe. Our chief case against Towne rested on Mr. Holcomb. I didn't want to assume entire responsibility for letting him go, before the

district attorney or Sheriff Smith sat in on the case. There seemed to be more behind the case than appeared on the surface at first. If there was a conspiracy behind Laurette's death there would be a possibility that the chief witness would be spirited away, even against his will."

"But you told me you thought Holcomb wasn't telling all he knew," Dr. Brown persisted.

"That was before I read the New York papers," Ball said. "It seemed to me yesterday unlikely that the missing heir should have turned up at midnight in a severe storm without any previous warning. If he had come earlier than that Jim Holcomb would have known it. But the facts learned in New York fully explain Towne's arrival.

"You haven't any questions you think Holcomb should be asked, then?" Brown pursued.

"Not a thing."

"If you were still in charge of this case, you would be perfectly satisfied to have him released?"

"Perfectly.'

"What is your opinion of the first murder now that the victim proves not to be Laurette?"

"Oh, my opinion is only a guess, of course. The first victim must have been an unknown tramp, or we'd have heard of some one reported missing. There seems to be no connection between the two murders. Perhaps it wasn't murder at all. This tramp may have stolen a suit of Laurette's clothes, and later got drowned. The mutilation may have occurred while the body was drifting among the rocks."

"Do I understand correctly that you are no longer working on either of the cases?"

"As long as the mystery seemed to be cleared up, I was given permission by headquarters last evening to drop the case entirely and continue my vacation which officially began yesterday."

Ball heard an audible sigh of relief somewhere in the group.

The verdict brought in by the jury found that Peter Laurette came to his death by the hand of Wallace Towne, that Marion Glover was probably killed by the same hand, and that the murderer lost his life in Deever's Swale while disposing of the body of his second victim.

As the group were dispersing after the dismissal of the jury, Jim Holcomb sidled over to the sheriff.

"Goin' to hang onto me any more, sheriff?" he asked hesitantly.

"Why, not unless the district attorney here says so."

"No, I don't want anything more of you, Holcomb," the prosecutor disclaimed. "The case is closed apparently."

Ball, starting off with Lockhart a moment later, waved his hand genially at the group.

"Well, good-by, everybody," he called. "I'm going off on a fishing trip."

CHAPTER XII.

BALL GOES FISHING.

"WELL, I give up," Ball admitted to Lockhart when they were alone. "Towne killed Laurette all right. No doubt about that."

"Don't see any way out of that, for a fact," Lockhart agreed gloomily.

"Just the same," Ball persisted, "Holcomb lied about his whereabouts that night, and Willis lied about not finding the bodies. There's a curious conspiracy back of all this. There's still a chance Jim had something to do about the other two. I'm going to find out. As I said, I'm going fishin'."

"Going to take me fishing with you?"

"Nope. Don't think I better, Bill. I can fish better alone. I'd rather have you watching things here. Tell you what you can do for me. I want about a case of nice Scotch to take with me on my trip, something that at least looks as though it came across the border. You can deal with a bootlegger, and it wouldn't be wise for me. See? How about it? I'll want it in about an hour."

Lockhart looked at him in amazement.

"What's the merry jest? And you a bird who boasts he hasn't taken a drop since you went on the force!"

"That's all right. Maybe I won't touch a drop now. Who knows? Kids mustn't ask questions. Do what papa tells you, and some day he'll explain."

"All right, Chick. I think I can have it by six. Anything else?"

"Yep. Get your story out of the way pronto, and then look up Jim Holcomb. I think he'll probably stay at Willis's place to-night. Don't think he'd care to sleep alone at Laurette's. Interview him or something, but anyhow keep him in sight till to-morrow noon without his getting wise. Call me at Seldon Falls Hotel to-morrow noon and report. I don't think he'll skip right away for fear of starting talk, but he might. Can you do that for me?"

"Surely can, Old Sphinx. I appreciate the confidence you repose in me."

"It isn't that, Bill. But I'm fussy about talking before I'm sure where I'm at, even to people I trust thoroughly."

At six thirty Ball was ready to start, letting it be known he wanted to get to the upper lake that evening so as to get in some early fishing in the morning. He had a hired canoe, a well filled duffel bag, pup tent, blankets and fishing tackle, hastily bought at the local store.

He padded diagonally up and across the lake, not coming within two miles of the beach opposite the Laurette place and the inlet from Deever's Swale. By dusk he paused near the opposite shore a good seven miles away. A jutting point hid completely the blinking lights of Trevor Bend.

By the time he had finished a meager meal it was pitch dark. There was no moon. A thin haze obscured the stars. Ball could hardly have found a better night for his purpose.

He headed the canoe back across the lake toward a point well to the right of the lights of Trevor Bend. An hour later he felt his way to the beach near Laurette's, and got out, taking with him a heavily laden traveling bag that had been secreted under his blankets in the stern.

Willis's attitude had made him wary. He was not sure Willis wouldn't suspect he was still on the trail. He might still have guards posted about the place till after the funeral.

Still moving as silently and cautiously as ever, therefore, he made his way to the Laurette barn, and once more broke in. Up in the hay mow in one corner, deep under the fragrant clover, he buried the contents of the traveling bag. A few minutes later he was back in his canoe and slipping silently toward deep water.

At this moment the wisdom of his seeming excessive caution was proven. His guess that he was being watched was verified. Feeling a little overconfident now, he dipped deep for a long, strong stroke, and his paddle made an audible splash. Instantly there was a sharp hail from the shore.

"Stop! Who's that? You in the boat there?"

Ball let his paddle lie in the water and leaned low himself, barely breathing.

"I told you I thought somebody was around!" announced a second voice.

"I've got you covered!" shouted the first man again. "We're deputy sheriffs, and we've got a motor boat and searchlight. Make any move to beat it, and we'll pepper you."

"Hop for the boat!" the fellow added to his partner.

There was a clatter of footsteps along the beach. Under cover of the sound, Ball took a dozen swift strokes, turning his canoe back toward the shore, and then heading it so that its momentum carried him some distance along, close to the beach. Then as he heard footsteps on the planking of the motor boat, he swung his craft to the beach and got out.

He was just in time. He had barely drawn himself and his canoe back under a curtain of overhanging bushes when the motor boat's searchlight flashed on and swept lake and shore in a wide circle.

Ball felt around and found a good-sized pebble. He threw it far over the heads of the pair in the motor boat. It fell with a splash beyond them.

"There he is again, right over there. He's headed up the lake," one man exclaimed.

"Nothin' but a fish!" the other protested.

"Fish! Hell!" the other replied. There was the roar of the motor and the craft chugged away on a false scent, sweeping the water ahead with its searchlight.

Ball slipped his craft back in the water and paddled like a madman down the lake, keeping near shore. He stopped only when he heard the motor boat slacken and the baffled men indulge in a debate of which he could distinguish nothing.

Now he went ashore again. Swinging his light craft onto his shoulder, he staggered off down the beach just inside the marginal undergrowth.

The motor boat was now racing up and down the lake in a wider and wider sweep, exploring with its searchlight as it went. Ball continued on his way till they gave it up and turned inshore again.

Then he took to the water once more, and, giving the vicinity of the Laurette beach a wide berth, paddled back across the lake, past the cove where he had eaten supper and, an hour before dawn, was encamped in his pup tent on the shore of the upper lake as though he had been there all night.

Just at daybreak he was out fishing. And a half hour later a motor boat chugged lazily within hail. He recognized the two men on board as a pair of rather unsavory henchmen of Willis. He hailed them.

"Hello, there! What you birds doin' out here so early?"

"Oh, hello, Ball!" exclaimed the man at the wheel, known around Trevor Bend as Bud Gozzler. "Sheriff swore us in to look out for a smuggler supposed to've headed this way. Anybody been through here since you came? How long you been here?"

"No. I ain't seen anybody. Didn't get here till dark last night, and rolled in soon's I could put up a tent. Stick around while I catch a mess of fish and I'll blow you to breakfast."

"No, thanks. Can't stop. Goin' to be here long?"

"Oh, a few days, likely, if the fishing's good. May try whipping a stream or two before I go back. Just loafing along the way I feel like."

"Well, good luck!"

"Thanks. So long."

Gozzler opened the throttle, and the motor boat shot off.

"Spying on me, all right," Ball thought. "Well, they didn't see much."

As soon as the deputies were out of sight he reeled in his line and paddled swiftly away.

It was twelve miles up the farther inlet to Seldon Falls, where he was to get a telephone report from Lockhart at noon. He must make that distance and accomplish an important mission before he got the call.

The falls, with its little mountain hamlet, was located strategically near one of the favorite thoroughfares across the Canadian line. At the Seldon Falls Hotel, therefore, Mr. Edward Yager, an enterprising and fairly honest young Federal prohibition agent, made his headquarters.

Now, Ted Yager and Chick Ball had been buddies on the New York police force and close friends for years. Since they had been stationed near each other in their respective services in the Adirondacks, they had helped each other out on many a case. Ball proposed now to call his friend Yager to his aid.

Yager, a serious-minded blond giant, was fortunately in when Ball arrived. He greeted Ball joyfully.

"What's brought you up here? I thought when I phoned you last week you said you were goin' to take a vacation at Bruce Lake?"

"Well, I'm making that headquarters, but I took a notion I'd like a few days fishing up this way, where the fishing's better."

They strolled out and threw themselves on a mossy bank by the river. Then, when he was sure no one could eavesdrop, Ball suddenly dropped his casual manner.

"Listen, Ted, I've got a case for you, and a chance that you can help me out on one of mine at the same time."

"You know I'm always there when you need me, Chick."

"Fine! I know you are. I suppose you read all about the second Laurette murder."

"All but the coroner's verdict. Our papers haven't come in yet to-day."

Ball briefly told of the inquest, and then added:

"I have a hunch that Jim Holcomb, the Laurette hired man, you remember, knows

more than he's told. I want to get him held in custody where he can't get scared and skip out while I look into it further on the Q.T."

"But where do I come in?"

"Now, just supposing you had pretty good evidence that this man Holcomb's doing a little bootlegging on the side? You could arrest him and hold him for trial, couldn't you?"

"Oh, good Lord! About every other man on the mountain's a bootlegger. I haven't time to run down every little suspect. We're all standing on tiptoe just now over a tip that there's a big rum-running syndicate getting away with millions up here.

"I'll tell you a secret," he went on after a moment. "I got confidential word from a friend of mine on the inside in Washington, that an independent sleuth's been sent up here recently to work over our heads, been up here two months, and not one of us got a line on him yet. My friend in Washington wrote me a week ago that they hadn't even heard from him down there in six weeks, so he's digging deep and got us all scared."

"But here's real evidence that perhaps may lead to something big," Ball protested. "Listen. You're getting a confidential tip now from a source you know's reliable, but you can't name at present—see? This party tells you Jim Holcomb's bootlegging, and using Laurette's barn as headquarters. This same mysterious party tells you he's seen liquor in the barn and an account book with it kept in Jim's handwriting. He believes that account book not only connects Jim with the liquor, but may give a tip to big operators higher up. Anyhow, Jim Holcomb's right in with the political gang, and they're protecting him.

"Now, then, with that information you get a search warrant for the Laurette barn pronto. You go there, break in, and search the hay mow.

"In the northeast corner, about four feet down, you'll find a case of whisky. Lying on top of it will be Jim's note book. Enough said.

"Grab Jim and keep him locked up while you're getting the rest of the evidence—that is, till you hear from me. You will probably find Jim at Willis's Hotel. If he isn't, wait there till Bill Lockhart calls you. Do you get me, and no questions asked?"

"Sure I get you. There won't be any come-back?"

"Not on you. If anything goes wrong and you absolutely have to square yourself, say you were acting on information from me."

"All right. I'll hop my motor cycle and get right off."

An hour later Ball got his call from Lockhart.

"Still there at Willis's place, but talking of taking a trip," was the newspaper man's cryptic statement.

"Good. Stick to him. If he leaves before night, call Ted Yager at Willis's place."

"Now I can do some more fishing," Ball told himself contentedly as he left the hotel and returned to his canoe.

CHAPTER XIII.

JIM HOLCOMB'S MIDNIGHT RIDE.

IT was mid afternoon when Chick Ball, paddling leisurely now, returned to his camp on the upper lake. He had made careful note of the arrangement of his utensils about his tent before leaving that morning. He was not surprised to find them slightly disarranged on his return. Some one had been there during his absence, might still be keeping an eye on him.

The next step in his fishing expedition was to see if he could ferret out where Jim Holcomb went in his "democrat buggy" that night of the murder.

Again he left his camp giving the appearance of its owner being near by and expecting to return shortly.

He took a trout rod, and struck off on foot through the woods, at first in the direction of one of the many small brooks that find their way directly or indirectly into the twin waters of Bruce Lake.

But once well back into the bush and certain that he was not being observed, he doubled and turned until any curious fol-

lower would be thrown off his trail. Then he set a straight, swift course across country toward the neighborhood of the Laurette farm some six miles away.

A little over an hour later he came out on the narrow mountain road leading past Laurette's.

The point where he struck it was just the other side of the log trestle across Deever's Swale. From where he stood, looking across the swale along the log bridge, he could see the giant pines that sheltered the house of tragedy.

Following a buggy trail three days old, one made in soft mud during a driving rain, is no easy matter. But Ball had certain distinct advantages.

He knew, to start with, that on the night of the murder Jim Holcomb had driven across the trestle and along this strip of road to the north of Laurette's, instead of going south toward the village.

How? The deposits of mud on the wheels of the buggy driven by Jim that night told the story. The road from Laurette's south along the lake shore to Trevor Bend was in white, sandy, lake shore soil. Had Jim only driven down to Willis's place at the station and back early that evening of the murder, as he had sworn, the last deposit on those wheels would have been a solid coating of dry, white, sandy mud. But it was not.

To the north of Laurette's the road immediately dropped down into the hollow occupied by Deever's Swale. The soil there was black, mostly of muck thrown up from the swamp. Beyond the trestle this black soil continued for some distance.

The last layer of still damp mud Ball had found on the wheels had been of black muck.

Jim, then, had driven home past the swale within an hour or so of giving the murder alarm. Where had he been beyond the swale? Other layers of fresh mud on the wheels pointed the way. Beneath the outer black layer was one of red clay, and beneath that more black muck.

Holcomb, therefore, had driven out from home toward the north, past the swale, and on over a clay road. He had returned by the same route.

Ball made no serious attempt to find wheel or hoof marks in the muck road. Such an effort would be futile. This exposed section of road had been subjected to the direct force of the storm. Even yet its surface was of little more than soupy consistency. As well try to trace the trail of a boat over a lake's bosom.

His first task was to find a clay road and see where it led. Ball knew the roads and the lay of the land of this region pretty thoroughly. But he never before had occasion to study the nature of the soil.

Following along the black road to the north, he came to a fork at the far edge of the swampy section. The left fork turned inland through the woods, skirting the swale for a mile or so, then crossing the inlet and continuing on three miles farther to one of the main highways. The right branch rose on a low bluff, followed the shore to the head of the upper lake, and then gradually dwindled to a mere trail in the almost unbroken woodland.

There was still no remnant of fresh wheel tracks to tell which branch Jim Holcomb had taken. Ball had no idea which road led into a clay belt. To take the wrong turn would mean losing a lot of valuable time.

A little reasoning, however, indicated the right-hand fork up the bluff as the most likely route. Ball had an idea Jim was seeking a secluded spot on that night ride. The road into the unbroken forest would promise the most of that.

In a few rods his judgment was vindicated. The upper road struck an outcropping of red clay.

But for several miles he followed this road, scanning it closely for the tracks he sought, and finding none.

As long as the road skirted the lake he passed an occasional camp or cabin. He gave these a wide berth. He decided against exposing himself at present. If he failed to pick up Holcomb's trail farther on, then would be time enough to retrace his steps and ask questions.

It was not till he reached the deep woods where a heavy canopy of greenery over the road had sheltered it somewhat from the rain, and frequent slopes had kept it

drained, that his faith and patience were finally rewarded. Here too there was even less travel, hardly enough to keep the grass from growing over the track.

And it was soon after he had reached this section that he first noticed what he sought, the occasional fresh rut made by a buggy tire.

At first he could not be certain that this track had been made by Holcomb's buggy. But presently even that doubt was settled. He came upon a bare spot that showed a distinct impression of a broken tire that had been mended by binding it with wire. The left hind tire of Jim's buggy had been so mended.

For what he judged to be about three miles farther he followed this lead. It soon began to grow dusky with approaching night and more and more difficult to keep to the faint trail. Again and again he thought he had gone beyond it. Then with the aid of his pocket flash he would find it again.

At length, however, after he had gone for half a mile or more without the reappearance of the wheel marks, he was forced to conclude that he had at last overshot the mark.

Slowly he retraced his steps, using his pocket flash light now. This time he caught what he had missed before—a faint wheel mark curving toward the side of the road. This puzzled him at first. The underbrush toward which the horse must have been driven head-on grew thick right to the very edge of the roadway.

When he investigated closely, however, he saw the trick. The flexible low-hanging limb of a hemlock curtained a gap in the underbrush. Lifting it, he saw beyond a well marked wagon road that had been traveled not infrequently. By thus lifting this limb a driver could easily get his horse and wagon through.

A little way along this bypath Ball's nostrils caught the scent of weed smoke and evening cooking.

He proceeded cautiously around a bend, and then suddenly dodged behind a bush. Just ahead in the gloom loomed a rambling log cabin, probably once the bunk house of a logging camp, a light glowing dimly through curtained windows. A roughly attired old woodsman sat on the low steps cleaning a mess of fish and swearing at a huge police dog who was not too patiently waiting for his share of the meal.

"Bimbo, you danged hog, if ye spent less time thinkin' about eatin' and more time watchin' fer the police, you'd be more worth yer keep. You're a hell of a police dog!"

The man finished cleaning his last fish, and went inside.

Ball thanked his luck for the hunger of Bimbo and the smell of fish in the dog's nostrils.

He backed cautiously into the bushes and skirted the camp till he was on the windward side of the brute. This outfit had a story to tell him, he was certain, and he didn't purpose to go away without hearing it.

Again luck favored him. A little way down a slope beyond the cabin was a swift little stream with a rumbling waterfall that deadened minor sounds. The wind, too, was rising, affording some protection against both the nostrils and ears of Bimbo. And complete darkness was near at hand.

Ball was crouched behind a big pine at the farthest corner of the cabin from the single door where the dog squatted snarling over his food. A low limb of the pine hung over the roof of the cabin, almost grazing it.

Almost beneath this point on the roof was an open window just under the low eaves. Through this, when the burlap curtain waved in the breeze, Ball caught sight of the man working about a rude kitchen. It occurred to Ball that the roof would be a good vantage point. He'd be safe from the dog, and, if he were discovered, could use the chimney as a shield in case of a pistol duel. It would be literally an ideal place for eavesdropping. It seemed to have been made to order.

The lower limbs of the pine were in easy reach. They made a good stepladder, up which he stole quietly to the limb that overhung the roof. He reached the perch he had selected for himself without noise or other mishap.

It was a low-pitched roof. He was able to lie on it safely with his feet toward the ridge pole and peer over the eaves into the window. This pine bough would screen him even if some one should turn a flash light his way.

At first he feared he was doomed to disappointment. Whenever the vagrant breeze flapping the curtain gave him a fleeting glimpse within he saw only a most commonplace interior.

The man who was frying the fish was a nondescript individual whom Ball could not remember ever having seen before. He was a man in the sixties, with an unkempt white beard and a fringe of hair in long need of cutting.

He looked like a man of vigorous health, but he had a furtive manner. He was given to stopping and listening at intervals as if he dreaded some sound that meant danger.

A half hour passed thus with nothing happening. Ball was getting numb lying in this cramped position. He was considering reversing himself for a rest when suddenly Bimbo broke out in clamor of barking.

In the midst of it Ball caught the shrill note of a whippoorwill.

"All right, Bimbo," called the old man, sticking his head out of the window.

"Atta boy, Bimbo," came another voice from the darkness.

Ball heard quick steps toward the other end of the house. The dog's tumult subsided to little yelps of pleasure. Some one entered the door and came through to the kitchen.

"Well, Pop," the listener heard the newcomer say in a low voice, "there's hell to pay down at the Bend, and it looks as if we'd have to duck. They've caught Jim Holcomb!"

CHAPTER XIV.

PETER LAURETTE'S FORTUNE.

THE waving curtain gave Ball a glimpse of the newcomer at this moment. He was a lean, sandy-complexioned man of about thirty, who looked more like a city "sport" than a woodsman. Ball remembered seeing him occasionally around Trevor Bend, but had never even known his name.

At the young man's announcement a look of incredulous terror came into the eyes of the older man, called Pop. He sank limply into a rickety chair.

"Did they git him fer murder?" Pop stammered at last.

"Nope—not yet, anyhow. It's just as bad fer us, though. They got him fer runnin' booze. Caught him with the goods, and found his account book."

"But—but—I don't see. I thought Jim brought the stuff back here Saturday night; he swore they wa'n't a bottle left round the place."

"Ye can't tell about Jim. He's always likely to get rattled when he's scared, and he was scared stiff that night. I told ol' Laurette time and time again Jim was a dangerous man to trust with ticklish business like he gave him.

"Anyhow, they found a case of booze in the hay mow he must have overlooked, and with it was that fool account book. Of course he kept it in code, but I'm afraid some expert bull will figure it out. Then where'll we be?"

"We made a mistake startin' work again 'fore the excitement over Pete's murder died out. So that was a government man Jim saw Satterday night. And we told him the lightnin' 'd made him see things. See, ye can't be too safe."

"Well, it seemed safe enough. They couldn't prove a darn thing on us, I figgered."

"How'd you find out about it? Ye did not go down to the Bend, did ye?"

"Me? I should say not. D'ye take me for one o' those morons? I sneaked down to the Laurette place, under cover, lookin' for Jim. I poked my head round the corner of the barn and saw Wash Ainslee standin' there lookin' like a cop on fixed post. He motioned me back without sayin' a word and followed me into the bush.

"'Beat it while the beatin's good!' he said. 'A Federal officer just raided the barn and grabbed a case of hooch and Jim's account book out of the mow. He's around here yet, and another one, he says, has nabbed Jim down at Willis's place.'

"So I beat it back; and that's all I know."

"What I'm 'fraid of is, they'll nail Jim fer murderin' Pete too, now they caught him. And s'pose Jim tells what he knows; we'll all be mixed up in it."

"Don't worry about Jim squealin'. He ain't that kind. They might get booze evidence on us, but they can't get any murder evidence. We don't know any more about who killed Pete Laurette than Ball does. If Jim did it, he's kept it to himself so far."

"But if they try Jim fer booze runnin', it 'll come out that Pete Laurette was boss of the gang."

Ball nearly fell off his precarious perch at this surprising revelation. Peter Laurette a master booze runner! Many mysterious things suddenly became clear to him.

"That's likely, but that won't prove one of the gang killed him."

"Wouldn't it, though. If we'd known before he died how much money he'd made out of it while we did most of the work, one of us would 'a' killed him long ago. Makes me mad's a hornet every time I think of it.

"Here's ol' Laurette; butts into the game without more'n a thousand dollars cash to his name, and that borrowed on his farm. In five years he makes half a million, and what 've we made? Not much more'n woodchopper's wages.

"You know's well's I do that one of our gang did it, and had good reason to. Maybe it was Jim. He had the best chance."

"Well, we got no time to stay around here gassin'. We better get the rest o' the booze down to the cave and hide out there ourselves till we find out what's doin'. They might come nosin' in here any minute now."

Ball could hardly restrain himself for elation. Here was the mystery of Peter Laurette's fortune solved. He, Ball, was not only about to solve both murder mysteries; he was going to unearth one of the biggest bootlegging conspiracies in the history of prohibition.

He decided he'd better change position at once. Even at the risk of falling afoul of the dog, he must follow this pair. Inch by inch he moved back and felt for a footing on the pine limb.

But, unfortunately, he was a little too hasty. The flexible limb was deceptive. As he put his weight on it, it bent suddenly and his grasp slipped. He struck the roof with a clattering crash.

For a moment he clutched frantically in the dark at insecure twigs. They broke his fall a little, but only added to the betraying tumult. He heard a duet of suppressed oaths inside the cabin. There was the sound of running feet mingled with the barking of the dog below him. Then his grasp loosened altogether. He skidded off the roof to the ground.

He was only slightly stunned by the short fall. He was conscious of the teeth of the dog at his throat, a sharp command from one of the men, a stinging blow on the head, then oblivion.

CHAPTER XV.

IN DEEVER'S SWALE.

WHEN Wallace Towne plunged into the thicket in pursuit of his cousin and coheir, Marion Glover, that Sunday morning after his discovery of the mysterious murder, he was driven by mixed motives.

He had suddenly found himself faced by twin perils, both deadly.

First, the girl believed him guilty. She had gone to spread the alarm. When he had arisen from his study of the slain man and looked into her terrified eyes, he had read accusation there. She had fled from him in fear of her life. Her fear of him had been so great that she had plunged into the storm almost unclad, locking a door between them.

Why not? Towne had realized on the instant that the evidence against him seemed conclusive. Here she found him, an unknown intruder in the house, bending above a dead body. She might be the next victim.

He must stop her, then, before she spread a false alarm and increased the difficulty of proving his innocence. His safety from

a murder charge might depend entirely on convincing her of her mistake. At least he must promptly and fearlessly tell his own story simultaneously with hers.

But Jim Holcomb, the sinister-looking hired man, seemed an even more immediate and deadly menace. As his girl cousin feared Towne, he feared Holcomb, and for the same reason.

For his instinctive thought as soon as he laid eyes on this man was that this was the murderer. Surprised at finding Towne, an unexpected witness, or near-witness of his crime, the slayer's natural impulse would be to kill that witness.

So as Towne sped toward the thicket beside the Laurette driveway, he expected at each stride to hear a shot behind him or the heavy tread of Holcomb's pursuing feet.

And he listened in almost equal dread for the outcry of the terrified, fleeing girl. But he reached the cover of the thicket without either fear being realized.

He had entered the bush at the point where, from the kitchen window, he had seen the girl disappear. Immediately he searched the ground for her footprints. But between the house and the swale was a rocky ridge whose hard surface gave little chance of such record.

In a moment, however, he found a small slipper mark in a shallow pocket of soil, a mark already being made fainter by the rain. He had expected that once she was under cover of the woods she would double back toward the nearest house. This footprint, however, led straight on toward Deever's Swale.

Memory of the legends of Deever's Swale, heard on his former visit, flashed over him. The girl was new to the region. Was she ignorant of her real peril ahead?

Suddenly, then, a third fear drove him on at top speed. He must stop her before she was mired in the swale. Indeed, it might already be too late.

Down the slope he ran, shouting her name. But he saw nothing of her, got no answering hail.

He stopped only when he found himself sinking to the ankles in muck. Drawing back a little, he swiftly skirted the margin of the swamp, peering in every direction as he went.

Then suddenly he saw her.

She was leaning, panting, against the trunk of a small tree, listening intently to his pursuit, her wide frightened eyes trying to pierce the half gloom of the forest.

The bottomless bog lay almost at her feet. As he darted forward, Towne saw in front of her a few deep prints in the mud.

Had she started to wade through the swale and drawn back again? Or were those the footprints of another venturer luring her with the false hope of a safe passage?

"Miss Glover!" he called. "Wait where you are. I'm your cousin, Wallace Towne. That's dangerous ground. I'll help you out. Stop—"

His voice failed in a gasp of horror.

The girl had stiffened for an instant as he spoke. Then, with a frightened scream, she had flung herself into the swale.

His blood froze at the sight. While he stared helpless, she struggled on, ankle-deep, knee-deep, then, with another piercing scream, sank to her armpits.

Towne's paralysis left him. He sprang toward her, his mind racing with the problem of what he could do to help her. He must throw something to her. But there was nothing to throw!

The girl had whirled about and clutched frantically at a huckleberry bush growing on a small isolated hummock some distance away, and bent over so that the tips of the branches lay just within her reach. Yet, slowly, inexorably, inch by inch, the deadly swale was sucking her down.

For want of anything else he pulled off his coat and, seizing the end of one sleeve, sought to get near enough to throw the other end to her as a life rope.

"No! No!" the girl screamed. "Leave me alone. Let me go."

For answer Towne tossed the coat to her.

"Keep cool, Miss Glover. I didn't kill that man. Only trying to save you. Get that coat under you. That'll help a little. I'll get a branch or something."

But reason was lost on the frantic girl. She seemed mad with fright.

"No! No! Leave me alone!" she

screamed, and flung herself away from even the frail support of the bush.

In an instant she sank to her chin. Without further thought, Towne plunged after her.

The next instant he found himself also mired waist-deep. He reached her just before her head went under.

She was too exhausted for more than feeble struggles now. He managed to get one arm about her, binding down her own arms to prevent her struggling. With his free hand, he took a strong hold on the bush and tried to draw her up.

But the net result was to sink lower himself.

He called repeatedly for help, but his only answer was the ceaseless rattle of the rain.

For what seemed an hour to Towne he persisted. He did manage to keep the girl's head above water, but no more than that. She lay inert against him, moaning feebly.

When the slimy water at length lapped under his chin and occasionally, in his gasping struggles, he got some of the foul stuff in his mouth, he gave up.

Ceasing his efforts he waited for the end. One numbed hand still clutched the huckleberry bush in a death grip. The other arm still feebly supported the half-conscious girl.

A wave of tender pity for her swept over him. Her upturned face rested against his helplessly, now almost with a suggestion of intimacy.

He thought bitterly of the bright future that had just opened ahead for her and for him, only to be snatched tragically from their grasp.

Would they have meant anything to each other if that future had been granted them, he wondered.

Then grotesquely inappropriate thoughts of his failing business intruded. There was an important letter he should have written before he left the city. He wondered what the would-be recipient would think when he failed to get it.

Oh, well! He would escape bankruptcy after all. No more debts to settle. No more duns. No more struggle. Just rest.

Steadily on their gray faces the gray rain beat down.

Somewhere from off over the marshes came to his ears the mocking, maniacal laughter of a loon.

And at that same moment, Deputy Sheriff Willis, a mile away, was telephoning to State Policeman Ball the report of the murder at the Laurette house, while Jim Holcomb stood behind him declaring excitedly over and over: "That feller Towne done it! I know he done it!"

CHAPTER XVI.

BY A MIRACLE.

A FEW hours after Towne thus resigned himself to death, Deputy Sheriff Willis would be declaring that no man lost alone in Deever's Swale "ever came out alive short of a miracle."

No one could realize the truth of that better than Towne himself.

But now that miracle happened.

Towne's wandering thoughts gradually came back to a consciousness that something was shifting in the limited field of his vision over the murky water now almost on a level with his eyes. For a moment, focusing his attention meant a struggle. But presently he saw what it was.

A big drift-log was slowly floating toward them on the sluggish current of the bayou!

Towne's heart leaped with sudden hope. It was a piece of timber some fifteen feet long and two feet in diameter. It would easily support their combined weight until help came.

But would he have the strength to draw himself and the girl onto it? Indeed, would it drift near enough for him to reach it?

For long torturing minutes he watched the slow course of the log. Nearer and nearer it crept, at first directly toward them.

Then Towne's heart sank again. Just as the end of the log was so near that he was gathering himself to reach for it, some sluggish cross-current caught it. The big boom began to swing slowly toward the center of the bayou.

Their momentary hope of safety was drifting by them, a scant yard away.

Towne took one last desperate chance. His coat still lay on the end of a huckleberry branch beside the one he was grasping. He released his grasp, seized a sleeve of the coat, and hurled the garment out over the top of the log, keeping hold of the sleeve.

He had aimed at a broken stump of a branch he could just see protruding from the far side of the log. By good luck the fabric caught on this stub and held.

His movement had thrust his head under, but he held his breath and pulled with all his remaining strength.

Slowly he felt the big timber yield. Then it rolled over. The coat slipped from the stub, flew back into the huckleberry bush, and fell from his unnerved grasp.

But the effort had succeeded. Frantically he clutched in the direction of the log and felt the rough bark with his finger tips.

He tried again and got his hand on top of the timber with enough purchase to pull his head and that of the girl above the slime again.

There he rested, exhausted, and choked with the muddy water.

The girl was now quite unconscious. He was in a panic of fear that she might be dead.

As soon as he could command the strength, he forced his hand across the unstable back of the log until he had his arm over it. Then, after repeated efforts, he dragged his legs up through the clinging ooze and got one of them on top of the timber.

It was a precarious business. Again and again the log rolled and threw him back. But with each roll it was drawn nearer to the shore and into slightly more stable mud.

At last he lay stomach down on top of the log, legs wrapped around it. By degrees, he drew the girl's body up and across it.

He was greatly relieved to find a faint pulse in her wrist.

Turning her cautiously on her back, he chafed her arms and face with his palms. Presently, her bosom began to heave, and her eyes fluttered open.

Immediately the look of wild terror returned. She struggled feebly.

Again the log threatened to roll over, but Towne spread his legs and steadied it, holding her firmly down at the same time. She was too weak to resist.

"Listen," he told her a little sharply. "You must keep perfectly still, or you'll drown us both. You are mistaken. I didn't kill that man, and I'm not going to hurt you."

He saw her eyes open wide with a look of surprise now, rather than fright. She regarded him searchingly for a moment.

"Why—I knew you didn't kill him," she whispered.

Towne was puzzled. Why then her mad flight from him? Was the girl a little mad from shock? And did she know who did commit the crime?

But there was no time then to study puzzles. The girl, with returning strength, had shifted position as she spoke. The log again started to roll.

Once more Towne was forced to exercise all his powers of balance to keep them from going over.

When they were on a steady keel again, he discovered that this last activity had worked the log loose from the bed of ooze into which it had been rolled by his earlier efforts.

They were drifting out and down the bayou toward the lake!

This was a new peril on which he had not counted. He had been confident of their precarious craft resting in its bed until help appeared.

After he had abandoned his first desperate and futile calls for help, he had worked in silence. Now, at the impulse to try it again, he suddenly checked himself.

Only one person was at all likely to be abroad in the wilderness on a stormy Sunday morning. That person was Jim Holcomb.

If Holcomb were guilty of the murder as he suspected, the fellow naturally would not help the two people who might incriminate him. Perhaps it was fear of Holcomb that had made the girl flee. It was significant that she had not rushed to Holcomb for help, though she must have known he

was in the barn. Holcomb might take steps to hasten their death before others blundered on the scene.

Calling would be futile then, perhaps dangerous. Anyhow, if Holcomb were innocent he would spread the alarm soon and they would be sought for.

"We'll drift till we come alongside of solid footing then we'll be all right," he assured the girl.

She acquiesced silently.

So these two heirs of Peter Laurette, who were soon to be pronounced officially dead, floated away together through the driving storm toward the open waters of Bruce Lake.

And Chick Ball and his party were already hurrying to the scene of the crime as fast as throbbing motors could carry them.

Several times, in their creeping progress, the log clutched bottom and halted momentarily. But each time a rod or more of impassable mud and quicksand lay between them and solid ground.

Each time Towne's hopes sank lower as he heard the rumble of the waves on the lake shore drawing nearer.

Once, during such a pause as he anxiously scanned the woodland through the driving rain, he fancied he caught sight of some one moving back in the bushes. Forgetful of his fear of Holcomb he shouted desperately for help.

Instantly the girl gave a convulsive start.

"No! No! Don't! I'd rather drown!" she cried.

Towne again barely kept the log from rolling over. He saw that the girl was in a highly hysterical state. She was certainly suffering from deadly fear of some one, probably Jim Holcomb, he thought now more confidently.

Perhaps she knew it was Holcomb who had done the killing, and had first thought Towne implicated. Then Towne could depend on her to free him from suspicion.

He forebore from questioning her now. In her hysterical state she was likely to drown them both by her sudden starts like that. He would take good pains not to frighten her again or cross her will until their feet were on firm ground.

At any rate, though he looked closely at the spot where he thought he had seen possible human movement, no one appeared. Probably a branch swaying in the wind had misled him.

It may have been fifteen minutes later, perhaps longer, that affairs took a new and startling turn.

The log drifted around a patch of reeds and out into the main channel. The next instant it was headed in a straight swift course for the open lake.

A little ahead of them lay the rude log trestle that carried the road over the swale. There was a brief hope of that stopping them. Towne watched for a chance to clutch one of the piles of the trestle as they passed.

But their log missed the nearest pile by three feet at least. They found themselves bobbing up and down on the lake swells.

A scant fifty yards away was a firm sand beach.

"Can you swim?" he asked of his companion.

"No! No! Not now. I know how, but I'm so weak I couldn't even stand up."

Towne was in little better shape himself. He was ordinarily a strong swimmer, but he was cramped, chilled, and utterly exhausted.

To make matters worse, another of the series of shifting squalls had swooped down, blowing offshore. It would mean swimming against wind and current.

Towne gave it up.

So the forlorn pair, clutching the bouncing log for dear life, started on their dubious journey across Bruce Lake just as Ball and his search party found the broken trail that had led Towne and the girl to supposed death in Deever's Swale.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I'LL NEVER TELL!"

IT was mid afternoon when wind and current nosed their log against a sand bar just offshore on the opposite side of the lake from Trevor Bend.

More dead than alive, Wallace Towne and Marion Glover dragged themselves

through the shallow water to the beach and dropped on the sand.

Fortunately, the storm had passed. For an hour now the July sun had been warming and drying air and soil. Never in Towne's life had anything felt so grateful to him as that hot sand.

For a few moments they chafed chilled, cramped limbs until their blood circulated again. Then, before either realized it, the sleep of complete exhaustion claimed them.

It was turning dusk when Towne awoke. A little distance away, the girl still slept.

He arose on one elbow, and for the first time since their tragic meeting that morning studied her deliberately. The soiled and tattered blue silk dressing gown displayed the outlines of a slender, well-molded figure. Her shapely little feet had long since lost the bedroom slippers in which she had fled from her room. Her radiant hair fell disheveled around a face to which her natural color had returned.

She looked like a healthy, outdoor girl of about twenty-five. As she lay in her tattered robe she might have been posing for a painting of a sleeping beggar-maid.

Towne decided she did not have "the Laurette look" with which family tradition credited him, the dark aquiline features and raw-boned frame which he shared with his dead uncle. Hers was the fine face of a gently reared, gentle-natured girl of intelligence and character.

As he watched her, she stirred uneasily and muttered in her sleep.

"Oh! Oh!" he heard her say. "Where can I go? I'll never tell! I'll never tell!"

Towne was startled. What did this mean? Did this mean that she knew who committed the murder, as he had already half guessed? But why should she be obsessed with the fear of telling who it was?

She showed signs of awaking now, and he arose and stole out of sight.

Better not let her know at present that he had overheard her half-waking confession, if it were such. Perhaps it had no real significance.

Anyhow, he would reconnoiter a little, and give her a chance to collect herself. Perhaps help would be right at hand.

For miles along this side of Bruce Lake was unbroken forest. The lodges of summer campers had not yet invaded it. Three miles across the lake Towne could see dimly through the twilight, the roofs of Trevor Bend. But here, Towne and the girl were as alone as if they had been on a desert island in mid-Pacific.

There was not much chance of the pair reaching human habitation and a much-needed dinner before night shut down and made travel too dangerous to attempt.

But in his search for a night's shelter, luck favored him.

A little way down the beach he came to a half-clearing and found at its back a deserted hunter's lodge of rough logs, used only during the hunting season.

He hurried back down the beach to awake Marion, and report his find.

But when he reached the place where he had left her sleeping, she was gone!

It was evident at a glance that she had not started in search of him. His tracks in the sand were too mistakable for her to miss.

He found the trail of her own unprotected little feet going in the opposite direction for a little distance, then striking into the forest.

He knew she could not have gone far during his brief absence. She must still be within sound of his voice. Yet she made no response to his repeated halloos.

Evidently she was fleeing again from him.

He stopped and considered this strange proceeding. Was the girl mad as he had feared more than once to-day?

But mad or not she could not get far away. She, like himself, must be faint from lack of food. Moreover, the rough ground would quickly put her shoeless feet out of service.

He pushed a little way into the bush himself, but it was nearly dark now in there. No chance of trailing her. There was too much danger of getting lost himself.

Again he hallooed repeatedly, but without result.

"Marion," he called at last. "Don't be foolish. I know you can hear me. I'll stay right here on the beach where we were. When you're tired of hiding, come out."

So he worked his way back to the open beach, and waited. There was still enough light from the afterglow to find some berry bushes he had noted near the shore, a few minutes earlier.

From their fruit he made a meager supper, washed it down with water, and felt better.

The stars came out one by one and complete darkness fell. He sat by the edge of the rippling water, chin on knees, and stared out over the lake to where the lights of Trevor Bend beckoned, three miles away.

At intervals he hallooed again, hoping each time he would hear signs of surrender from the fugitive. But each time he was disappointed.

Finally one by one the lights of the village died, and evening passed into midnight.

Again and again he heard, or fancied he heard, above the ripple of water and sighing of the wind, the sound of stealthy footsteps back of him. Once he thought he heard a scream.

But each time he was forced to conclude he had heard merely some prowling night animal, or had been tricked by pure fancy.

A little before dawn he dozed at intervals. The light was just breaking in a pink flush over sky and water when he awoke from one of those brief fits of slumber.

He realized that some sound had awakened him. Now he heard it again off to the right of him, a low, sobbing moan.

He scrambled to his feet and ran up the beach. The next moment he almost stumbled over her.

Marion Glover was crawling painfully across the sand on hands and knees directly toward the water.

"Marion!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter? What are you doing?"

At the sound of his voice she leaped up convulsively and sprang toward the water, only to fall in a helpless, crumpled heap, sobbing wildly.

She was a pitiful spectacle he saw as he bent over her—robe torn to ribbons, her feet bruised and bleeding, one ankle badly swollen, evidently from a sprain.

And she was quite out of her mind at last.

Tenderly he gathered her in his arms. She was too weak for further struggle.

But as he staggered along the beach with his burden, toward the deserted cabin, she moaned feebly over and over again:

"I'll never tell! I'll never tell!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"WE CAN'T GO BACK."

TOWNE inferred from his experience as a soldier in the World War that the girl was suffering from a species of hysteria similar to shell shock, brought on by the shock of the tragedy and her secret knowledge she was trying so desperately to guard.

Of course it was complicated by lack of food and sleep, physical strain and exposure, and the injuries from her night of wandering in the woods.

Before taking her into the cabin, he laid her gently down on the sand and examined her hurts in the growing light.

Face and limbs were scratched livid by brambles, and blotched with the stings of insects. Her feet were badly bruised and lacerated.

As nearly as he could make out, her swollen ankle was not broken. She had turned it on a root or stone, and sprained it badly. It must have been excruciatingly painful.

At least she would be unable to run away from him again for awhile.

He washed his pocket handkerchief out thoroughly in the lake, and bathed her cuts and scratches. Then he used the handkerchief as a bandage for her ankle.

The cabin was equipped with rude bunks nailed to the wall, and filled with soft pine needles. In a corner he found some old sacking, which he shook free of dust, and used as improvised blankets.

Here he laid her, and for the next twenty-four hours was almost constantly at her side as an impromptu combination of physician and nurse.

Towne had confidently expected that as soon as the morning was well advanced, some boat party from the village or hotel would come within hail, and their rescue

would be a matter of only two or three hours at the outside.

But he did not realize that all the population of Trevor Bend was absorbed that morning in the Laurette murder. Most of the able-bodied male population were out beating the woods far and wide for Towne himself, on the bare chance that he had not perished in Deever's Swale, as it seemed.

Though he peered out the cabin door across the water a hundred times that day, no craft came within hail.

There was little chance of passers through the woods on this side of the lake where the couple was marooned. For many miles in every direction from the lake it was unbroken virgin forest. It was so infested with mosquitoes and black flies during the hot months that it was practically deserted, except in the hunting and trapping seasons.

He dared leave his patient only for a moment at a time. In those brief absences he gathered berries in old cans he had found on a rubbish pile back of the cabin. He also kept on hand a supply of cool, clear water from a near-by spring.

He kept the girl cool by frequently bathing her limbs and face. Every hour or so he gave her a drink of water or berry juice.

To these ministrations she yielded docilely. She was, at any rate, too weak to resist. Much of the time she seemed unconscious of them.

In between she slept fitfully while he fended off the swarming insects with a small oak branch.

Whenever she dozed off she muttered constantly in her sleep that one refrain: "I'll never tell! I'll never tell!"

Just at dusk she seemed a little more rational. He induced her to eat a quantity of berries and butternut meats.

After that she fell into a deep sleep, and did not awake till after daylight the next morning.

He was sitting beside her, fanning her, when she opened her eyes. At once he saw restored reason in her startled gaze.

She tried to sit up, but sank back weakly with a cry of pain.

"Where am I? What's happened?" she demanded.

"Don't you remember? You fell in the swamp, and I pulled you out on a log. We floated across the lake."

He saw the hurt shock of returning memory in her eyes. And then she shuddered violently.

"Yes, I remember," she whispered. "I remember going to sleep on the sand, and waking up frightened. I ran away in the woods, and you kept calling me. That's all I remember."

"You got hurt and were delirious," he explained. "I brought you to this cabin near by."

"Does anybody else know I'm here?" she demanded in sudden panic.

"No. Not yet. Now that you're better, I'll go and get help. We're only a little way from the village, just across the lake."

"Oh! No, no!" she cried in wild terror again.

Towne feared her mind was wandering once more. He must keep her humored.

"All right," he said. "Just as you wish. I only want to help you."

She seemed to be a little reassured, studied him speculatively.

"I remember you said you were my cousin, Wallace Towne," she whispered. "How do I know you are?"

"Well, I lost my coat with my papers in it. Perhaps if I give you a little family history it will convince you."

He related what he knew of the more intimate facts of their respective branches of the Laurette tribe, and explained how he had heard of his uncle's death, and of his belated arrival.

She seemed a little reassured.

"You seem nice, anyhow," she said. "And you've been very good to me."

"I'm glad to find I've got such a nice cousin," he said gallantly. "I couldn't help doing all I could for you."

At his words she seemed to shrink from him momentarily, as though he had struck her.

Towne was puzzled.

"You're not afraid of me any more, are you?" he asked.

She studied his face doubtfully for a moment.

"I—don't believe so," she agreed.

"Why should you be? You said once you remember, that you knew I didn't—didn't kill that man."

She shuddered, and a look of fresh terror swept over her face. For a moment Towne regretted his reference. But he had to have this matter straightened out and prepare the way tactfully for getting help without driving the girl into another fit of hysteria.

"Yes," she whispered finally. "I knew you didn't do it."

"You were afraid of Jim Holcomb, the hired man, then? Do you think he did it?"

She looked surprised.

"Jim? Oh, no. Jim couldn't have done it. He was away all night."

"He was!" Towne exclaimed, surprised in his turn. "But he told me he was there all night."

She looked incredulous.

"When and where did you see him?" she demanded.

"Just after you ran out of the house that morning. He came in with the milk."

"It's strange he should say he had been there. Still, I'm afraid Jim drinks some. He probably was away drunk, and didn't want us to know it. He drove out right after supper and didn't get back till after daylight in the morning, just a little while before I saw you."

"Then, if neither Jim nor I did it, who did?"

Again the frightened look.

"Why! How do I know? Why do you ask me? Why do you look like that?"

"There! There! My dear girl! Of course you don't know. I was just puzzled, that's all. Let's not talk about it any more. When we get back we can help them straighten it out all right."

"Go back! Why, we can't go back! Neither of us can ever go back!"

"But, why not? We've nothing to fear."

"Nothing to fear? We'd never be able to make anybody believe we didn't do it, or at least one of us. We were both there alone with him at night, and we were the only people in the world who had any reason to want to kill him."

She showed signs of breaking again.

"Let's give it up now, and talk about something else till you feel better. We haven't got to go back."

"I know, you think my mind is wandering again," she startled him by saying, as if echoing his thoughts. "It isn't. I'm as sane as you are now."

"Then what did you mean by our having a reason to kill him? Who is he, anyhow? Do you know?"

"Why, don't you know?" she demanded, amazed. "Our uncle, Peter Laurette, of course."

"What!" Towne burst out.

"Yes. You didn't recognize him then? You don't remember him as well as I do. I knew him the minute I saw him."

"But—the papers said he was murdered over a month ago!"

"I know, but that was evidently a mistake. Poor Uncle Peter had been missing, and they found a body they thought was his. That's all. It wasn't his, because he came back the other night."

She broke into a flood of hysterical tears.

Towne lay silent in a maze of readjustment. Then what he thought was a nightmare of his own when he seemed to see his uncle in the room that night, was no nightmare, but the tragic truth!

"No," he agreed at last, after the girl had controlled herself a little. "I guess we can't go back. At least, not at present!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

LIFE, THE HUNTSMAN

I SAW Fame, eagle-breasted, far above,
And made its great-winged loveliness my aim:
Then to my heart there flew the lone bird, Love—
I held it close, and longed no more for Fame!

Margaret Ashmun.

Ninth Man of the Eight

By JOHN BARKER HYDE

"BOYS, I'm not going to ask you to give me the best you've got. I know you'll do that. You wouldn't be a Briarton crew if you didn't. But to-day, fellows, your best won't be good enough.

"Not that you're not a good crew. You're a damn good crew—so far as practice goes. You've got perfect form. You know it. You row like a machine. That's the trouble.

"Three times in practice you've almost cracked the course record. That's good. Better'n any other crew has done this season. And you're consistent—too damned consistent!

"Those other crews aren't. They haven't got your form. But they want to win. They want to win bad. And they're full of blood, and guts, and fight! *Fight!*"

The Old Man bared his teeth in a sudden fierce grin. He was addressing his final words to the eight oarsmen of the Briarton Varsity crew as they sat boated before him, brawny and muscled, tightening their laces, testing their slides, and tentatively twisting their oars in the locks.

"Fight! D'ye understand?" He shook a clenched fist in their faces. "Blood, guts, and fight! Aw, what's the use? I've taught you all I know—except the meaning of that word. You'll go out there. You'll give your best. You'll row like a machine, and you'll disgrace Briarton!

"And why?

"Listen. Get this, you men—*when blood and guts set out to win they can lick any eight damn dummies that ever sat in a race boat!* You'll lose! You'll lose and you'll disgrace your coach and your college!

"No disgrace in losing? No; two of the three crews out there this afternoon have got to lose. But you'll lose without a fight and you'll disgrace Briarton—old Briarton, that has always put out fighting crews and fighting teams!

"Don't row like a machine, men! A machine can't fight! Don't stop at giving only your best!

"Row like a Briarton crew—a *fighting*

crew! *Give me better than your best and fight. Damn it! Fight! Fight! Fight!"*

Then, for the first time, the Old Man turned to Midge Hawkins, the little coxswain. "That's all, cox. Take 'em away—and mind you steer straight."

Midge nodded. Pete, the rigger, and the three assistant managers caught hold of the four sweeps that rested on the float. Gently they pushed the fragile shell out into the stream.

Midge, whose weight was a little over half the average of the men who faced him, sat tensely waiting. The steering lines were clenched in his fists. A bright red megaphone was strapped to his mouth.

"Bow four!" he called. "Ready! Row!" A moment later, when a couple of strokes had carried the shell a safe distance from the float—"Waaa-*yall!*"

The shell drifted quietly. The sun was hot. The men still fussed with their rigging.

Fine physical specimens, clad solely in trunks and thick socks, their bronze backs bare to the sun, shoulder muscles rippling as, for the last time, they adjusted the laces that held their feet to the stretchers.

Midge envied them. Envied every man of the eight, but particularly big Steve Rushmore, captain and stroke.

Steve was Briarton's hero for that year. Everybody liked him. Midge liked him, too, but nevertheless envied him; and admired him.

Steve was six foot two; Midge, a bare five. Steve weighed one eighty-five; Midge, ninety-eight; Steve had shoulders so broad that they seemed to jut out on both sides of the shell; he was muscled all over, even on his lower chest and flat stomach, so that with every motion little ridges twisted and played under his bronze skin like live things. He had arms—

Well, he could grab one of the long heavy sweeps, as it lay on the float, by the extreme end of the handle and raise it to the vertical by a twist of the wrist alone.

As for Midge—Midge was just a skinny kid. He had never attempted the test with the oar. He had known that he could not do it.

And so they sat facing each other. Steve Rushmore, the captain and stroke of the 'varsity eight, the keystone upon which so much depended, the man upon whom all the sports writers and the public centered their attention; and Midge Hawkins, unnoticed, ignored almost, only the coxswain—the ninth man of the eight.

"All right, everybody?" called Midge.

"Naw!"

Seven oars, parallel each to each and at right angles to the keel, red blades flat on the water, projected from the sides of the shell. One oar was out of alignment—the second from Midge on the starboard side.

"What's the matter, Five?"

"Sock was wrinkled; had to undo my laces."

"Make it snappy!"

Midge turned and glanced back at the float, some distance away by this time. It was deserted now, save by one lone figure—the Old Man.

The door of the boathouse yawned dark and forbidding at the end of the gangway. From the tall flagpole, the red banner of Briarton drooped dispiritedly in the quiet air. As Midge watched, the Old Man turned and started slowly up the gangway.

"Great line the Old Man shot us," Midge recognized Seven's voice. "And after he's been telling us all along that a strong back and a weak mind were all a crewman needed!"

"Better'n our best—that's all he wants!" The words and the chuckle that followed were Steve's.

"It's the old hooey!" This from Six.

So that was the way they had taken it. They had seen through it all. Midge had not. He had fallen for it, had felt his throat tighten, and the tears come perilously near welling into his eyes.

Even though the Old Man had not spoken to him directly, he had felt that no sacrifice would be too great, no effort too impossible. He had chafed at the fate that had kept him from being one of the eight called upon to fight, that left him only two things to do—call the stroke and steer a straight course.

He would show them that he had not been fooled by the Old Man's heroics. He

faced forward and grinned at Steve from behind the megaphone. "Rah-rah stuff! Ready, Five?"

"Yep."

Midge raised his voice. "Ready all!" Eight seats slid aft as one, and eight hungry red blades reached forward for the catch. "Row!" And together the eight blades bit into the water.

Midge tightened his lines. Slowly, easily, their backs behind it and their legs working like well-oiled pistons, Briarton's Varsity pulled down for the starting line with a long body swing.

On the catch Midge could see only one head before him—Steve Rushmore's. Then, as they finished, the one head gave place to eight. Bow, Three, Five, and Seven swayed to starboard; Two, Four, Six, and Stroke, to port. Each man to his own side of the steady keel, and each, when it seemed that he was lying almost flat back in the shell, giving just the proper down-and-away thrust with his wrists before he started the slow recovery.

That was what did it—that thrust. It added inches to the run between strokes, gave the blade exactly the little twisting kick that was needed to bring it out cleanly and keep the shell shooting steadily ahead.

Spacing prettily. Clearing their puddles with ease. No sign of a check in the run between strokes. Perfect form.

Midge grinned. What a fool he had been to fall for that rah-rah stuff of the Old Man's. Perfect form and—he glanced at the eight bronzed huskies—unlimited latent power. Better than their best! How did the Old Man get that way?

They were getting near the starting line. Already Midge could make out the colors hoisted in the three rowboats anchored there—the blue of Harwell on his right, Briarton's bright red in the middle, and Syralumnia's yellow to his left. The observation train was puffing into position, and he could see the heat waves shimmering along the tracks.

A few more long swinging strokes, and then—

"Waaa-*yall!*"

The eight men finished their stroke cleanly and sat erect, the tips of their blades just skimming the water with a soft *zip-zip-zip* as the shell glided ahead under its own momentum. Astern, Midge could hear the grunt of leathers in rowlocks as Harwell, and then Syralumnia, came up from behind.

"Bow and Three! Ready—row! Stroke and Six, back water!"

Slowly the long shell swung around until its stern was toward the rowboat from which flapped Briarton's red pennant. Bit by bit Midge maneuvered until the man in the boat was able to grasp the end of the rudder and hold the shell motionless while Harwell and Syralumnia also worked into position.

Midge was glad they had drawn the center lane. It gave him a chance to look thoroughly over both their opponents. He did so now.

Three men in the Harwell boat had bad hands. The strips of surgeon's plaster told him that. Syralumnia, the dope had it, was suffering from boils. They looked out of condition.

Briarton had it cinched. Midge's eyes met Steve's. He grinned. Steve grinned back in confidence. The race was as good as won.

Better than their best—against those cripples? Huh!

A softly purring white launch, gleaming with brass work and bearing on its forward deck an official with a big megaphone in his hand, slipped around the curve in the bank and headed toward them. Syralumnia's bow oar took a couple of short strokes to straighten out the shell. The bumping and jolting of the observation train ceased. The official raised the megaphone to his lips.

"*Ready, Harwell!*"

And suddenly Midge began to tremble, sweat dampened the palms of his hands, and he went icy cold with excitement. It seemed ages before he heard the voice again.

"*Ready, Briarton?*"

Midge nodded and the eight men reached out as one, each stretching far aft for the first catch and drive that was to send them away to a racing start.

"*Ready, Syralumnia?*"

To Midge the voice sounded miles and miles away. He could scarcely see Steve

through the mist of excitement that was gathering before his eyes.

His throat tightened; his mouth went dry; his teeth chattered; the pit of his stomach was dropping, dropping, dropping—

"Go!"

A grunt of rigging and the shell shot forward. Oars flailed and thrashed frantically. All about was water whipped white by the flashing, slashing blades. Frenzy, spray, confusion—

Then suddenly his head cleared. *"Seven! Eight! Nine! Ten! Catch! Catch!"* And then, more slowly, *"Catch! Drive! Catch! Drive!"* Then, a little slower still, *Catch! Drive!* Catch! *Drive!* Catch! *Dr-i-v-e!"*

Midge watched Steve closely. Slower and slower went the beat. Now they were getting the rhythm. He could feel the keel steady down to its smooth shooting speed. An even thirty to the minute, as near as he could judge it.

"Catch! *Dr-i-v-e!* Don't rush your slide, Four! Catch! *Dr-i-v-e!* Catch! *Dr-i-ve!"*

Midge glanced at the other two boats. Syralumnia leading by about three feet. Harwell about even, but hitting up its stroke. Let 'em!

He watched the puddles that shot back with each stroke of the Briarton blades. Steve's oar was dipping well forward of the swirl left by Number Two; keel steady as a church.

"Catch! Dr-i-ve! Catch! Dr-i-ve!"

Harwell had settled down to its stroke and was slowly drawing away. Syralumnia had accepted the challenge and was dropping Briarton farther astern.

"Catch! Dr-i-ve!"

It seemed to Midge that Syralumnia was pulling about thirty-six. As Harwell picked up on them Syralumnia quickened the beat until it seeemed that both were rowing around thirty-eight. His own boat, with a long powerful stroke that was at times nearer twenty-eight than thirty, was slowly being left behind.

Midge grinned and was satisfied, even though, at the half mile, he knew that almost a length of open water must be visible between their bow and Syralumnia's stern. At the mile the distance had grown to two and a half lengths, and Harwell, still pulling a thirty-eight, led Syralumnia by a little, but the white splashes of her oars showed that her men were slugging and breaking under the pace.

Then Syralumnia shot up the beat to a killing forty. Harwell failed to respond and dropped back to three-quarters of a length behind Syralumnia. Briarton, with its unvarying thirty, trailed along almost four lengths in the rear.

"Catch! Dr-i-ve! Catch! Dr-i-ve!" called Midge complacently, then he nodded to Steve, and almost imperceptibly quickened the beat. "Catch! *Dr-i-ve!"*

Thirty-four. Bit by bit, with smooth unhurried swing, Briarton ate up the blue water between herself and her rivals. At the mile and a half she was abreast of the fagged Harwell eight, and steadily drawing up on the fleeing Syralumnia combination.

Steady, relentless as a machine, Briarton sped on; but Syralumnia would not give up the lead without a struggle. Her yellow blades flashed into a momentary thirty-eight. She even drew a little farther ahead, but her sprint against Harwell had left its mark. She could not stand the pace.

"Catch! Dr-i-ve!" and Briarton swept by, the rhythm of her red oars never varying, at an even thirty-four.

Midge's heart thumped exultantly against his ribs. He had never been in doubt as to the outcome, but now they were in the lead.

Nothing but the long stretch of river was ahead of them. Harwell and Syralumnia were trailing and played out. They had shot their bolts, while Briarton—

The men were still rowing cleanly, getting their blades out together with a snap, feathering perfectly, and slipping in without a splash on the catch. The sweat on the brown, muscled bodies gleamed in the sun, but Midge could detect no sign of fatigue.

Like some invisible chain, stretched from neck to neck, their perfect rhythm bound them together.

At each catch Midge could hear the chugging thud as the eight leathers thumped

into the rowlocks at the same instant. Then, as the tawny bodies swung back, he could feel the exultant leap and thrill of the keel as the eight pairs of legs drove their slides and nearly three-quarters of a ton of bone and muscle heaved steadily on the long sweeps.

A slow, unhurried recovery and the unchecked carry and run of the slender shell as they slid aft and reached out for the new catch. Together, always together, bound by the rhythm, backward and forward went the bronzed bodies with the effortless, unvarying swings of a pendulum.

"Catch Dr-i-ve! Catch! Dr-i-ve! Catch! Dr-i-ve!"

The two-mile flags flashed by. Rattles, jolts, and sporadic cheering from the observation train. Harwell and Syralumnia somewhere behind, and Briarton's bright red blades still dipping with a machine-like precision as she swept into the last mile at her steady thirty-four.

"Catch! Dr-i-ve! Catch! Dr-i-ve! Catch! Dr-i-ve! Catch—"

Midge droned monotonously. The rhythm soothed him like a lullaby. No need to worry. Long, smooth, steady strokes eating up the calm water. All was quiet, peaceful, serene.

The sun glinted sleepily on the glassy surface of the river. On the right bank, the Briarton boathouse, the great red flag still hanging lazily from its pole. On the float, a lone figure.

Better than their best to win; what a fool to think the Old Man meant it. Why, they were unbeatable; they had not even been forced to extend themselves to win. And how they were being cheered from that observation train. A walk-away!

All the personal glory, of course, would go to Steve as captain and stroke. Well, Steve was a good fellow. Midge did not regret his own effort—the wearisome months of working about the machines, eating always less than he had craved in order to keep his weight down; or those bitter days of early spring, the ice barely out of the river, when he had sat shivering and drenched in the stern of a barge.

He did not regret any of it. Quite something to have been even the ninth man of a winning Briarton Varsity Eight. But to Steve—

And how they were cheering!

He glanced toward the observation train.

"Catch—"

Impossible; it could not be; and yet—

A rude awakening from the reverie into which the rhythmic cadence of the long, steady stroke had lulled him. Almost on a line with his rudder, and creeping steadily up, he had glimpsed Syralumnia's long, knifelike bow.

The barking grunt of the rival cox came to his ears—*"Uh-huh! Uh-huh! Uh-huh!"* He did not know where they had found the strength, but they were coming on fast. Sprinting.

Midge looked at Steve, who must have known from the first that they were being overhauled. There was no sign in the stroke's face; possibly a slightly puzzled expression about his eyes, but apparently that was all.

"Uh-huh! Uh-huh!" and the tapering bow of the Syralumnia shell was even with Midge.

Briarton still at thirty-four. It was unthinkable that the other crew could hold its present gruelling pace, but perhaps it would be as well to open up a mite and drop Syralumnia behind.

Midge nodded to Stroke. "Hit 'er up a bit, Steve."

Steve's eyes answered, and his brows knit in a frown, but there was no change in the steady thirty-four. Behind Steve, the Briarton men were still fresh, and looked as if they had just started out on a practice spin.

The red blades still reached out and took the water as smoothly and easily as before. Like eight well-oiled automatons they still drove the long shell ahead with great, powerful strokes, and maintained their perfect form and precision.

Over in the Syralumnia boat, now almost even with Briarton, things were different. Midge could see the agony of exhaustion in the men's faces. They were breathing in great gulps, mouths opening and shutting like gold-fish. The cords in their necks were rigid, and the veins stood out purple on their dripping foreheads.

Bow was skying his oar on the recovery. Two was late on the catch; Three and Four were shooting their slides; Five, slugging desperately; Six, finishing short; Seven, washing out; and the Stroke, reeling drunkenly from side to side, dropping his head between his arms on the catch.

In the smooth water their yellow blades kicked up a foam and smother that would have shamed a freshman barge, but they were fighting! Every last man of them was fighting for all he had in him; yes, and a little bit more!

They were giving better than their best! That was what the Old Man had meant. Midge saw it now; saw it as that ragged, fighting boatload of blood and guts splashed by him. Saw it as the outclassed Syralumnia shell, by main strength, nerve, and the indomitable will to win, slugged its way past Briarton's smoothly swinging perfection of form and rhythm.

"Catch! *Drive!* Catch! *Drive!* Catch! *Drive!*"

"*Uh-huh! Uh-huh! Uh-huh!*" came the savage bark of the rival coxswain and Midge heard the sobbing gasps of the Syralumnia oarsmen as they struggled for breath.

Still Briarton held her unhurried thirty-four.

Syralumnia had stolen the lead. That would not do.

"*Catch Drive! Catch! Drive!*" exhorted Midge. "Hit 'er up, Steve! Hit 'er up!"

The frown deepened on Steve's forehead. Then, as Steve slid aft toward him, Midge saw the Stroke's lips move and caught a single word: "Can't!"

Syralumnia's yellow blades—slashing, slugging, splashing—were a half length ahead of the rhythmically rising and falling red ones that sent Briarton along so steadily. Jerkily, Syralumnia was increasing its lead.

Unmoved, apparently uninterested, Briarton swept along with unvaried beat. An even thirty-four; steady, deliberate, with a machinelike monotony, although Midge was yelling his lungs out in an endeavor to get the stroke up.

And yet here was real danger, for Syralumnia had a lead of almost a length and the finish was a bare half mile ahead.

"*When blood and guts set out to win they can lick any eight damn dummies that ever sat in a race-boat!*" The Old Man's words came back to Midge with a horrible intensity.

The Old Man had told them not to row like a machine, and they had. He had said that they would lose—lose without a fight—and that was just what they were going to do. They were going to disgrace their college—old Briarton that had always put out fighting teams and fighting crews.

Were they, then—those eight splendid physical specimens that were swaying back and forth in front of him like so many automatons—were they nothing but eight damn dummies? Was Briarton's Varsity Eight no better than so much machinery? Where was the thing that made them men? Where was their spirit, the old fight?

Midge trembled like a fox terrier emerging from an unexpected bath in icy water.

Eight damn dummies; he had called on them in the crisis and they had not responded. They were fresh. They were going to finish fresh. They were going to be licked, and, to their everlasting disgrace and shame, they were going to be licked without a fight.

Rhythm they had; rhythm and power.

Rhythm and power—and Syralumnia was a length ahead!

But what of him, Midge? Was he to sit there quietly and let himself be carried to ignominy because Briarton Varsity would not, or could not, put up a fight? Was he only another damn dummy?

No! Midge's jaw tightened with resolution.

Only the coxswain, perhaps, and physically a skinny runt. Ninth man of the Eight—*but he was a man! He would make them fight!*

"*Catch! Drive!*" yelled Midge.

Still no response. Still the eternal, rhythmic thirty-four—and Syralumnia holding its lead.

But Midge guessed what the trouble was. The change of pace; they could not get it. They were bound by the rhythm, hypno-

tized by the very regularity and perfection of their stroke.

He sensed it himself, felt it in the recurrent thrill and shoot of the slender shell, heard it in the regular thump of leathers in rowlocks.

"*Hit 'er up!*" he yelled again. "*Catch! Catch! Catch!*"

Still no response.

"*Catch!*" and then, suddenly, he yanked hard on his port tiller rope.

The shell slewed to port.

It was in the middle of a stroke. The starboard oars flashed in the air, the port oars dug deep beneath the surface of the water. The port oarsmen were slammed over backward by the handles of their sweeps, the starboard oarsmen fell backward when their blades were suddenly released from the pressure of the water.

Rocking badly, the shell stopped dead.

The rhythm was broken.

"*Ready all!*" yelled Midge, and out of chaos came order as the eight men picked themselves up and all slid forward together as they had at the start. "*Go!*"

Syralumnia five lengths ahead and only a little more than a quarter of a mile to the finish!

"*One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Hit 'er up, you damn dummies! Ten more good ones! The ol' fight! One! Two!* Come on! *Fight! Fight! Fight!*"

Red blades flashed back and forth in a frenzy. The long shell steadied on her keel and seemed fairly to lift her forward sections clear of the water. Briarton was slashing and splashing, too. The wake was a long line of churning, seething water.

"*Fight! Fight! Fight!*"

Viciously the flying red blades bit at the water and hurled Briarton on after her fleeing rival.

A hundred yards from the finish Briarton had closed up the open water. Her bow was just lapping the leading shell's stern when Syralumnia opened up another superhuman sprint.

A roar of cheering burst from the observation train. Massed throngs on either bank at the finish line echoed it. Automobile sirens wailed and squawked; white jets of steam shot from the whistles of the flag-covered yachts; tugs and excursion boats added their deep, reverberating undertones.

For fifty yards more the shells held their relative positions. Then Syralumnia cracked under the strain and Briarton, her bright red blades flashing like fire in the sun, the spray flying out behind her, and white crescents spurting up on each side of her bow, hurtled into the lead.

"*Waaa-yall!*" Midge's voice rang out exultantly.

It had been a wonderful finish—a fighting finish. So close had the two shells been that the judges hesitated some time before they made a decision. Then, by a vote of two to one, they awarded the race to Syralumnia.

Briarton had lost. A fraction of a second had made the difference. They had not passed Syralumnia until both were over the line. Yet, even as they paddled over to toss their red shirts to the exhausted victors, they were satisfied. Syralumnia had put up a gallant fight and had deserved to win.

And when they got back to the float the Old Man was waiting for them.

"Boys, I'm proud of you," he told them. "You lost, but you went down fighting! Briarton's proud of you! It isn't *whether* you win or lose that counts—it's *how!* You lost, but you lost fighting! Nobody can ask any more than that. It's an honor to Briarton!"

What mattered, after that, if the next morning all the sporting pages of the country and their millions of readers asked the same perplexing question: Why, when Briarton's coxswain had lost them the race by his bad steering, had the crew elected him captain for the following year?

But the Briarton Varsity crew knew the answer. It was their way of thanking the man who had saved them from disgrace; who had risked all in snapping the chains of the rhythm that had bound them; who had made it possible for them to taste the eternal glory of being beaten, *but going down fighting*—little Midge Hawkins, ninth man of the eight.

THE END

A Small Town Guy

By C. C. WADDELL

Author of "A Boob There Was," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II.

RUSH HOLLISTER hears a pistol shot in an adjoining cheap apartment. Investigation proves the person who fired the shot to be a pretty woman who had defended herself against the attack of a young man who, wounded, has left the building to notify the police. The young woman, terrified, tries to leap from the window to the street, but Hollister overpowers her and saves her from self-destruction. He realizes that while her act has been justified she is in a serious position, as the wounded man has strong political influence. He hears the girl's story, how she had been induced to come to New York to marry a man whom she later discovers to be married, and Hollister decides to help her. He is on the eve of returning to a small up-State town to assist in his father's factory. With the aid of his friend, Eustace Blake, he gets the girl into a drawing-room on a train and back to his home town. Eustace bobs the girl's hair and disguises her as well as possible, and Hollister, as the new factory manager, employs her, but the publication of the girl's picture in a New York newspaper and the intrigues of a disgruntled employee excite suspicion. Hollister, Sr., decides to investigate.

CHAPTER XIV.

ENTER, THE SHEIK.

BEATRICE, peering out of her office window the next morning, saw the head of Hollister's come down to the factory, looking as grim as a Simon Legree, and, with a fluttering heart, she began to prepare herself for the unpleasant interview which she felt sure was coming.

But, as it happened, the boss's consideration was temporarily switched from her to another channel, for in the morning's mail he found a letter from Rush giving proofs of Mr. Jack Phaldon's previous activities, and arguing against any further dealings with him.

It furnished Mr. Hollister with an outlet for the irritation which had been growing in him during a more or less sleepless night

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and, as Rush had predicted, he sent a wire to Phaldon breaking off negotiations, which fairly made the wires sizzle.

But at the same time the incident caused him to feel a bit doubtful of his own judgment. He was hardly in a position to play stern parent and arbiter of destiny to a son who had just prevented him from making a ghastly business blunder.

To perpetrate, right on top of that, another error in regard to this Baker girl, by misinterpreting what might be a perfectly blameless set of circumstances, would surely make Rush think he was falling into his dotage. Better go slow, he decided, and be more sure of his ground before he started to kick up a row.

So, instead of going back to Room 5 and calling Beatrice to the carpet as he had planned, he busied himself at getting into long distance telephone communication with Rush in New York.

In a somewhat humbler tone than he was accustomed to use, he congratulated his son on his success in unearthing Phaldon's shady record and suggested that since Rush was in the city, he had better try his hand at securing a satisfactory sales agent.

He was just turning away from the telephone when, to his surprise, Jennifer breezed into the office, far sooner than he had dared hope for her to return. She had stopped at the factory on her way up to the house from the station.

"Hello, Dads!" she greeted him, carelessly. "Back again, you see, like the proverbial bad penny."

Yet, under her assumption of nonchalance, a close observer would have seen that her dark eyes were glittering with suppressed excitement and her chin lifted to an angle of defiance.

She chattered a minute or two about her trip; then, rising restlessly from the chair where she had seated herself, started toward the corridor.

"I'll just run back and say 'Howdy,' to Helen Baker, while I'm here," she said.

"Er—wait a moment!" he stayed her, frowning. "Do you think it's altogether wise to make such a companion of that young woman?"

Jennifer turned with uplifted brows.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Well"—he fell back on Bancroft's argument—"nobody knows anything about where she came from, or what—"

"Oh, be yourself!" Jennifer interrupted, scornfully. "Helen Baker carries her passport in her face and in everything she says and does. If that's all you have against her—"

"But it isn't," he broke in, doggedly. And then he told her of the letter episode, and of the girl's peculiar secretiveness in regard to her drive with Rush.

But before he had finished Jennifer was elatedly clapping her hands.

"Out driving with Rush?" she repeated, delightedly. "Scrumptuous! Why, you poor, silly old Dads, don't you know that Rush has been crazy in love with her ever since she came here? He simply couldn't hide it. And I think she's been gone on him, too, but has held back on account of silly pride, or something of the sort.

"This looks, though, as if they'd reached an understanding. And that letter you're talking about? When did you catch her reading it; yesterday morning? Sure; no wonder she got confused, when she saw you standing over her. I'll bet you, anything you dare, it was from Rush."

"But I won't have it!" bristled Hollister, his face purpling. "Rush is going to marry you, and—"

"Oh, no; he isn't!" Her tone suddenly grew hard. "I know that you and all the rest of Glendale have held that idea since the two of us were babies, but you might as well get it out of your heads. I think I have something to say on that subject; and you can take it from me that I wouldn't marry Rush Hollister if he was the last man alive. I—I have other plans." Again, that reckless light flashed into her eyes.

"You ought to be proud to get such a daughter-in-law as Helen Baker," she finished, with warm partisanship. "She's worth a dozen of me."

"Humph!" he sneered. "A Miss Nobody of Nowhere, who's either afraid or ashamed to tell anything about herself."

"Applesauce!" Jennifer hunched her shoulders, impudently. "Don't be a snob, Dads. She'll tell you all that's necessary

about herself, whenever she thinks you have the right to hear it.

"And anyhow," she delivered a swift *riposte*, "if Rush wants to marry her, I don't see what you are going to do about it. You can't threaten or drive him. You tried that once, and he left you flat; and you need him now more than you did then. The only thing you can do is to stir up Helen, and make them unhappy. And if you do that, Dads Hollister, I'll never forgive you."

With this as an ultimatum, she whirled on her smart heels and went *tap-tapping* off down the hall to Room 5.

She did not find Beatrice there, but a girl in the next office told her that Miss Baker had only stepped out for a moment, and would be right back; so Jennifer waited.

Standing at the window, watching for her friend's return, she saw Beatrice after a second or two come hurriedly out of a telegraph office a little way up the street from the factory. The girl glanced quickly to right and left, as if to make sure that she was not observed; then walked rapidly back toward the plant.

There was nothing about the episode to create question—anybody might have reason to send a telegram—nothing except the quick look to right and left. But suspicion is the most contagious thing in the world, and that suggestion of wariness in Beatrice's manner, coming right on top of Mr. Hollister's expression of distrust, gave Jennifer a twinge of doubt.

A loyal soul, she put it hastily away from her, but, because of it, her greeting, when Beatrice came in a moment later, was perhaps a shade less clubby and intimate than it would otherwise have been.

Beatrice felt the touch of constraint, and reacted to it in kind, so that a slight barrier was erected between them. Ordinarily, Jennifer would have asked with impulsive sympathy what made her friend so pale, and why Beatrice's eyes were red as if she had been crying; and possibly through an interchange of confidences, much further misunderstanding and trouble might have been avoided.

But, as it was, they talked mostly in generalities. Beatrice inquired politely if Jennifer had enjoyed her trip, and listened to an account of various gayeties incident to the regatta. She was dying to ask if Mr. Hollister had spoken of their expedition to the country club the night before or of the unfortunate disclosures on the road home; but since Jennifer did not refer to the matter, neither did she. Instead, they held solely to the subject of Jennifer's experiences.

"And you didn't grab off your sheik, after all?" Beatrice said, with an attempt at vivacity.

Jennifer's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Don't be too sure of that," she said. "At any rate, I met a man who was awfully nice to me, and who is certainly the most wonderful partner I ever danced with.

"I'll tell you about it." She pulled up her chair, with a nearer approach to her usual manner. "We were in the parlor car together going up to New London, and got to talking. Roll your eyes, if you want to; I admit everything brazenly. It was a regular, vulgar, railroad-journey flirtation. I was feeling blue and on edge, wishing for a thrill of some kind, and when this good-looking young fellow began doing his stuff, why, I didn't exactly freeze him.

"Well, his line, I found, wasn't bad at all. He wasn't pushing or fresh or anything of the sort; yet, somehow, he made you feel that you were the only thing in the world that counted. Not an unpleasant change from around here," she broke out, resentfully, "where everybody takes you for granted.

"Anyhow," she went on with her story, "we teamed up very cozy for the rest of the ride. He told me that he was going up to the boat races, too, and wanted to know what I'd be doing that evening. I told him I was dated for dinner and a dance on Commodore Mason's yacht, and he nodded in a sort of quick, snappy way he has, and said: 'Good enough. I'll be there, too.'

"'Oh, do you know the Masons?' I asked.

"'No,' he laughed, 'but I guess I can manage it.'

"I never dreamed for a second that he could. I thought, when I left him at the

station, that was the last I'd see of him. I knew how hard and fast Mrs. Mason is, and how she hates anything like a crowd at her shows. But, blow m' tops'ls, matey, if along about six bells somebody didn't cut in on me, and when I looked up, there was my boy friend from the train.

"'How did you work it?' I gasped. 'Do you know somebody that's here?'

"'Not a soul,' he grinned. 'I just crashed it.'

"Don't you love the sublime nerve of that, Helen? Crashing a party on a private yacht, and Commodore Mason's yacht at that? Why, there were people in New London who would have given their souls to be in his place.

"'That isn't anything,' he leaned down and whispered to me. 'I'd take a whole lot bigger chance than that to be with you, little one.'

"The orchestra was playing 'Oh, Katerina,' and everybody had been fox trotting to it; but no sooner were we off, than he started me on the Charleston. And, believe me, baby, he throws a wicked kick. I sure learned about dancing from him.

"After that," Jennifer ran on, "he clamped right to me all evening, hardly let anybody else have a look-in; and when the thing was over, he went back to the hotel with Grace and Mrs. Deaver and myself. Then, next morning, he was right on deck again, sticking to my side like a burr all day long. He left after the big race, said he had to go back to New York on business; but he told me, when he said good-by, that he would see me again inside of twenty-four hours.

"Of course, that may be just bunk," she deprecated; "but somehow I think he means it. And it frightens me, Helen. If he comes here, I don't know what mightn't happen. You know, a man that would crash a party on Commodore Mason's yacht—well, there are simply no limits to his audacity. And then, too, how am I to explain him to Dads and everybody?"

Beatrice looked at her. The girl's eyes were shining with excitement; she was evidently uplifted over the conquest she had made and yet she did not appear happy.

"Are you in love with him, Jennifer?" Beatrice asked.

"Why, I—I don't know. He's awfully good-looking, and I like him, and he dances like a dream; but—but—well, I'm not sure. And that's what frightens me. I'm afraid he'll come here and sweep me off my feet, and then I'd be sorry afterward."

Beatrice's eyes grew grave. She was thinking of her own experience with Jack Phaldon.

"That is not love, dear," she said, gently. "You take my advice, and stick to your trout fishing."

"Oh!" Jennifer gave an exasperated jerk of the head. "Listen to you, and I'd spend my life in watchful waiting. You talk like a born old maid, but I notice—"

She broke off abruptly. She had been on the edge of the very thing she had cautioned Mr. Hollister against, blundering onto the delicate ground of an attachment between Beatrice and Rush. Since Beatrice had not seen fit to confide in her, she had no right even to refer to that.

Reddening and confused, she dropped her eyes. Directly under them, on top of the waste basket, lay a sheet of yellow paper, a crumpled telegraph form, which had unfolded and showed across it a line or two of handwriting—evidently the first draft of the message Beatrice had sent.

It was addressed to Rush Hollister in New York, and ran:

> Situation has become critical. Unless you return and square me somehow I will be forced to tell everything.

What she meant, of course was that she was afraid, if grilled by his father, she might break down and give away all the circumstances that had brought her to Glendale; but she had certainly expressed herself unfortunately. The message could not well have been framed to seem more like the threat of a blackmailer.

But Jennifer, with her mind on another tack, didn't quite grasp that at the moment. Before she realized what she was doing, she had read the message; but her immediate reaction was only a distasteful sense of spying, a thing abhorrent to her straightforward nature.

She flung up her head impatiently, and went back to the question they had been discussing.

"Maybe," she said, defiantly, "it would be worth while to be swept off one's feet by a sheik, even if one came to smash in doing it. It would be living anyhow, while it lasted; and it would show some people that I wasn't just a lump of putty to be molded into any shape they thought suitable.

"I don't know but what I'll take a shy at it," she declared, "if 'Spitz' Darrel really means what he says."

Beatrice stared at her.

"Who?" she muttered, dazedly.

"Frank Darrel. The man I've been talking to you about. That's his right name, but everybody in New York calls him Spitz, he told me. Why, do you know him?"

"I—I've heard of him," Beatrice stammered. Then her tone steadied. "And it wasn't anything to his credit, Jennifer."

"Oh, you mean that shooting scrape?" Jennifer brushed the detraction aside with a flip of her hand. "He told me all about it. Some woman tried to work a shakedown on a friend of his; and when Spitz threatened to have her arrested, she shot him. Anyway, that wouldn't count with me. You can't expect a sheik to be a Sir Galahad. All that I'm afraid of is, he may not show up."

She laughed and, springing up in her impulsive way, blew a kiss from her finger tips, and fluttered off.

Beatrice, stunned, sat listening to her heels go tapping down the corridor.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER BANKING HOURS.

LIFE has a way of using the long arm of coincidence.

For Spitz Darrel to show threateningly on the Glendale horizon, right after she had averted a similar visitation from Jack Phaldon, seemed to Beatrice rather a crowding of the mourners. Yet, in both instances, there was a perfectly natural explanation for the happening.

And, after all, isn't that the way things go with most of us—seasons of uneventful quiet, and then other seasons where it's just one upset after another, like the strips of fat and lean in a side of bacon.

Probably it was some old sage's recognition of this fact that is responsible for the familiar proverb: "It never rains but it pours."

The only coincidence in the case of Darrel was that he happened to be a passenger on the same car with Jennifer going to New London. That he tried to scrape an acquaintance with her is in no way surprising. It would have been the same thing with any good-looking girl who was traveling alone.

Then, when in their subsequent conversation he had placed her status by a series of seemingly casual questions, he decided it might be worth while to cultivate her.

The reason of that hasty return of his to New York was really to satisfy himself that he would be making no mistake—especially from a financial standpoint—in following up the flirtation; and he occupied the journey in running over the various points he had gleaned from Jennifer, and figuring where he could best secure the information he was after.

Glendale? He knew of it vaguely as a hick town somewhere above Albany; but he was also conscious of some recent link of connection with the name, which he could not quite recall.

Ah! He remembered now. It was a letter from a Glendale cop named Reeder or something of the sort, which had come to the detective agency the day before, asking if the reward was still up for Beatrice Gore. But little attention had been paid to it; similar inquiries were continually coming in from rural Sherlock Holmeses who had been misled by a chance resemblance.

No; Spitz shook his head. That wasn't what he had been thinking of; there was some other reference to the place in his mind. Then it came to him. Only a week before, he had heard Jack Phaldon exulting over some deal he had put through with a big Glendale manufacturer. Yes, and the name was Hollister. Easy sailing now. Trust Phaldon to have all the dope—social, financial, commercial—on anybody he was doing business with.

So, on reaching town, Darrel at once set out on a search for his friend, and finally located him in the lobby of the Hotel McVittie. Not knowing just what plans Phaldon himself might be concocting—there may be honor among thieves, but none among birds of this class—Spitz approached the subject warily by extending an invitation to dinner.

"Can't," Phaldon declined. "I'm looking for a man. I told you, didn't I, about that proposition I've got on with old man Hollister up at Glendale? Well, his son, Rush, is in town, I learned this afternoon, registered here at the McVittie; and I want to get in touch with him. I've phoned to his room three times and paged him all over the place, but he doesn't answer. I've just got to roost here and wait until the boloney comes in."

Darrel dropped into a chair beside him, congratulating himself on a lucky break. No difficulty in bringing up the subject now.

"These yokels are sure hard to put a finger on when they hit the bright lights," he commented with a laugh, "especially, if they happen to have a wad with them. And I suppose this guy is somewhere near the Rockefeller class, eh?"

"Oh, yes," Phaldon nodded; "Hollister is one of the best known concerns of its kind in the country. A little old-fashioned, but absolutely gilt edged. I understand this Rush has been taking hold lately, and speeding things up a bit."

"An only child?" queried Darrel indifferently.

"Well, yes; although you'd hardly think so, to hear the old man talk. He's always singing the praises of his ward, a Miss Jennifer Doane, and is hoping, I gather, to marry her to Rush. Not a bad thing for Hollister either, as she is an heiress in her own right."

"How much of one?" Spitz busied himself lighting a cigarette to mask his interest.

"Oh, over the million mark at least. I took the trouble to look up the income tax reports on the bunch of them and the way it figures she can't help but rate up somewhere around that amount."

A million! Spitz involuntarily licked his lips. A million! And all his, by glory, if he only played his cards deftly enough. That trip to New London bade fair to be the luckiest move he had ever made in his life, even though he had backed the losing crew and had lost considerably more than he could afford.

This reminder of his empty pockets, and the realization that he would need ready cash to conduct a campaign for the heiress's hand dashed his soaring spirits for a moment. Perhaps, though, he could put over a touch on Phaldon!

"Speaking of money"—he edged his chair a trifle closer—"they nicked me pretty hard at New London, and as it happens, the uncle is off me for the present. How about a couple of hundred to tide me over until the old boy softens up again?"

But Phaldon didn't loosen for a cent.

"Sorry," he said coldly, "but I'm playing pretty close to the cushion myself. If for any reason this Hollister deal doesn't go over I don't know what I'll do."

They both relapsed into a moody contemplation of their fortunes, Spitz cudgeling his brains to think up some plan of raising the wind sufficiently to blow him to Glendale and provide for those attentions which, as a supposedly prosperous New Yorker, he would have to show to Jennifer.

A boy in uniform passed by them monotonously intoning: "Mr. Hollister! Mr. Hollister!"

"They're paging him for me again," muttered Phaldon. "I told them to do it every half hour, but it don't seem to—"

He broke off abruptly at the sight of a tall young man who had just entered the lobby and was halting the page to take his message—a young man, with a bandage about his head and some strips of sticking plaster across the bridge of his nose, and at whose side trotted a lighter figure, wearing a disreputable slouch hat and a flowing tie.

"By Jove! At last!" Phaldon exclaimed, springing to his feet and dashing across the lobby.

Darrel saw him extend his hand, evidently introducing himself, but the other man evaded the proffered handshake, and with a mere curt word or two passed on with his companion toward the desk.

Phaldon came back, crestfallen and obviously worried.

"Swell-headed pup!" he growled. "Told me my business was entirely in his father's hands, and there would be no advantage in discussing it with him. Wonder if he was just high-hatting me, or if something has gone wrong?"

Darrel said nothing, but he knew what the trouble was all right; for when the tall stranger turned to speak to Phaldon, Spitz had recognized him as the fellow who had come out and offered assistance the morning that he staggered, wounded, from Beatrice Gore's apartment.

Like a flash the whole thing became clear to him. It had always been known that some man had aided the girl in her get-away from the apartment house, and probably had smuggled her out of town. Undoubtedly it was this Rush Hollister, and the chances were that he had taken her to Glendale with him. By heck, that cop up there wasn't such a fathead after all.

No wonder, then, that young Hollister should have been cool in his attitude toward Phaldon. Beatrice, of course, had told him her story, and she would hardly have painted the traveling man in flattering colors. Sure, that was it. Darrel had noticed, if Phaldon didn't, a sort of bristling hostility on the part of both Hollister and his companion. Why, the little fellow had looked as if he needed but a word to fly at Phaldon's throat.

"Your little deal is in the ashcan, Jackie, old dear," Spitz told himself knowingly. "Those birds will never let you light in Glendale, not in a thousand years."

But he was not bothering himself particularly over Phaldon's troubles. Rather, he was speculating how he could best use this information he had stumbled upon to his own advantage. There ought to be money in knowledge of that sort, he felt.

His first notion was to tackle Rush. Surely a wealthy young business man like that would pay heavily to avoid scandal. Still, on the other hand, Rush didn't look like a fellow who would stand for a shakedown; and if he turned nasty, it might interfere with the winning of Jennifer, where the stake was a million.

A safer course, Spitz reflected, was to see what could be done with Beatrice Gore. Like most of his slimy ilk, he preferred to deal with a woman in negotiations of that sort. She couldn't be squeezed, of course, for any such amount as he could demand from Hollister, but she would be less difficult to handle. He remembered how easily he had induced her to part with Jack Phaldon's letter by merely throwing the scare of arrest into her.

The thing to do, as he saw it, was to locate Beatrice—that oughtn't to be hard in a small place like Glendale—and blackmail her for immediate expenses; then by rush tactics to persuade Jennifer into an elopement before Hollister got back from New York. For he was pretty certain that if Rush ever caught a glimpse of him, he could bid good-by to any hopes of annexing that million.

He would have to work fast; but fast work was his specialty, and if Jennifer was still in the reckless humor she had shown at New London, he believed the thing could be managed. And once married to her, he could afford to laugh at the rage of the Hollisters.

A pretty scheme; but there was one very serious obstacle to it. He was flat broke. He didn't have even enough money to pay his fare to Glendale, and he didn't know of a person from whom he could borrow it.

Desperately he turned to Phaldon, who was slumped down in his chair scowling and biting at his finger nails.

"Look here," he urged insinuatingly; "the way I size it up, that deal of yours has struck a snag. Young Hollister wouldn't be treating you that way unless he took his cue from the old man. Chances are that somebody's been rapping you, or else they've hooked up to a more favorable proposition. Whatever it is, you're fighting in the dark. So the best thing you can do is send me up there to scout around a bit, and find out what's biting 'em."

Phaldon stopped gnawing at his fingernails, and considered. It might not be a bad idea. Spitz, as he knew, had a certain ferretlike ability, utterly unhampered by scruples of decency, for getting at inside facts.

"I'll think it over." He nodded less sourly. "Listen, you call me up first thing in the morning, and if I decide to try it out, I'll meet you at the station, and fix you up for the eight forty."

Spitz would have preferred to leave that night, but beggars cannot be choosers, and, after all, the slight delay would make but little difference in his plans. The main point was that he had been able to cadge the trip out of Phaldon, for he had no doubt that the latter would conclude to send him.

He had, however, no intention of wasting any of his valuable time on Phaldon's affairs. For one thing, he was convinced that Phaldon was already ditched. Also, he had his own fish to fry.

Consequently, when true to expectation he set off the next morning for Glendale, it could hardly be called a coincidence so much as a result of tricky and scheming conniving.

It would have been a coincidence perhaps, and a fortunate one, if Rush Hollister had been a passenger on the same train, but Beatrice's S O S telegram recalling Rush to Glendale did not reach him until long after the eight forty had departed.

There being no other connection he could take that would get him home before next morning, Rush, in view of the imperative summons, decided to fall back on his car. By hard driving he could cover the distance in nine or ten hours and be with Beatrice at a reasonable hour that evening. Accordingly, he left a hasty note for Eustace, and whirled away.

But motor travel is more or less subject to delays and interruptions, and a couple of blowouts added to a puzzling bit of engine trouble played hob with his schedule.

Rush was still far south of Albany when Mr. Darrel, duly arrived at Glendale and having had a conference with Reeder, the motor cop, dropped in late that afternoon at the office of the factory, and finding Mr. Hollister engaged, sat down to wait until he was at liberty.

The manufacturer, as it happened, was concluding a contract for the erection of a new addition to the plant, which the growth of the business had demanded; and Spitz, waiting just outside the railing could hardly help hearing the conversation that went on as various details were discussed and various papers signed up.

"I don't see any bond here," Mr. Hollister said as he looked over the different documents in the transaction.

"No, sir," replied the contractor. "We're putting up Liberty Bonds for security on this job. Here they are." He pulled a bulky parcel from under his coat. "Thirty thousand dollars' worth. Count 'em."

"All right," grumbled Mr. Hollister, satisfying himself of the correctness of the statement. "But it's certainly a devil of a time of day to load me down with anything of this sort; after banking hours. I'll have to keep them in the safe overnight."

Involuntarily Spitz shot a sidewise glance at the safe. So swift was it, and so completely did he seem absorbed in a trade periodical which he had picked up to occupy himself with, that no one watching him would have believed that he had lifted his eyes from the printed page.

But he had seen quite enough to assure him that Mr. Hollister was fully justified in his misgivings. The safe was an old-fashioned contraption that would hardly resist the attack of a can opener.

Still grumbling, the manufacturer swung back its ancient door, and began gathering up the bonds and papers to put them away. And at that moment Beatrice Gore came down the corridor and started out through the office with her hat on, leaving for the day.

CHAPTER XVI.

MONKEY BUSINESS.

MR. HOLLISTER glanced up over his shoulder as Beatrice passed toward the railing.

"Oh, Miss Baker!" he halted her.

Darrel, watching from behind the trade journal with which he was shielding his face, saw her shrink apprehensively as she paused.

Beatrice had waited all day in a semi-

panic for the boss to question her. Now she was facing the ordeal.

But she was given a moment's respite in which to try and collect herself, for the building contractor had risen and was picking up his hat.

"Well, I guess everything's settled now, Mr. Hollister, and I'll be moving along," he said.

"All right, Dorgan." The manufacturer nodded. "But hereafter, see that you close your contracts with me inside of banking hours. I'm not a bit stuck on having the care of this thirty thousand dollars overnight."

Then, as the contractor stumped away, he closed the door of the safe and, setting the combination, swung about to Beatrice.

"You—you wanted to speak to me, Mr. Hollister?" she said faintly.

"Why, yes. I was wondering if you knew where Jennifer is?"

"Wh-where Jennifer is?" she stammered. The question was so different from what she had expected that it took her a second or two to gather her wits.

"Just that." He looked a little surprised at the uneasiness of her manner. "I've been telephoning all over, trying to reach her, and was wondering if she'd forgotten an engagement to take dinner with me out at the lake this evening."

"Oh!" Beatrice had herself under control by this time. "Why, surely, Mr. Hollister. She's at the hairdresser's. She called me up only a little while ago, wanting me to meet her there on my way home. Shall I tell her that you are waiting for her?"

"If you please. Remind her of our dinner engagement, won't you? And ask her to pick me up at the Kiwanis Club at half past six. By the way, there's room for three in her car. Won't you come with us, Miss Baker?"

She hesitated a moment; then shook her head. He remembered afterward that her glance had drifted as if involuntarily toward the safe.

What she was actually thinking was that the answer to her telegram to Rush might come during her absence, or, for that matter, Rush might appear in person; and in either event, she wanted to be on hand.

"Not to-night, I think, thank you," she excused herself. "I—I have some arrears of sleep to make up. I'll give your message to Jennifer, though. The Kiwanis Club at half past six, is it?"

"Right. Good night, Miss Baker."

"Good night, Mr. Hollister."

Relieved at having escaped the interrogation she had been dreading, she hurried swiftly out of the office, without even a glance at the man who sat just outside the railing, with his hat pulled down over his forehead, and his face buried in the pages of the *Machinery World*.

With her departure, Hollister straightened out one of two things on his desk, and then recalling that some one was waiting to see him, came out through the gate of the railing.

"Mr. Darrel?" He glanced at the card in his hand. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Why, I represent the Eureka Engraving Company of New York, Mr. Hollister, and as I understand you are doing considerable catalogue work, I wanted to—"

"Sorry," the boss interrupted him, "but that sort of thing is outside my province. Those details are entirely in the hands of Mr. Blake, our advertising manager, and he happens at present to be in New York."

"And there is no one else I can talk to?" suggested Spitz. "We have a very tempting proposition to offer, and if—"

"No one else to-night, I'm afraid." Mr. Hollister shook his head. "Miss Baker, Mr. Blake's assistant, is the young lady you just saw going out."

Darrel, with a proper show of disappointment, started away, then, as if struck by a sudden idea, turned back.

"Perhaps Miss Baker would consent to grant me an interview this evening?" he said. "I'm very anxious to get this proposition of ours before you people."

Mr. Hollister rather liked the fellow's persistence.

"Well, you can try," he smiled, and gave Beatrice's address and telephone number.

Spitz thanked him and went out.

A block or so up the street he found Reeder eagerly awaiting his report, and greeted the motor cop with a disgruntled shake of the head.

He had got all he wanted from Reeder, and was now ready to drop him. It wasn't at all in his program to have this country flivver chaser gumming up the game.

"Nothing to it," he said curtly. "This Miss Baker is no more like Beatrice Gore than you're like Baby Peggy."

Reeder's face fell. He had counted that thousand dollars reward as almost a cinch. Yet he could hardly gainsay so positive a disclaimer.

"Maybe you didn't see the right girl?" he gulped, catching at a last straw. "Why, the picture and description fits her just the same as a glove."

"Oh, you can't go by pictures and descriptions." The city man shrugged impatiently. "I tell you, there isn't a chance of a mistake. Old man Hollister pointed this Miss Baker out to me himself; and if she was the woman who shot me, I guess I'd know it, wouldn't I? Some faint, general resemblance, perhaps, but absolutely not the same girl."

That settled the matter, so far as Reeder was concerned, and, glumly mounting his motor cycle, he wheeled away, while Darrel thoughtfully proceeded on his way toward the hotel.

Somehow, Spitz couldn't get out of his mind the juicy bundle of Liberty Bonds reposing so insecurely in that old cracker box of a safe at the factory.

Of course, thirty thousand dollars was a mere drop in the bucket compared to the million he was hoping to scoop in with Jennifer; but the million was bracketed with a pretty sizable "if," and thirty grand was thirty grand, no matter how much money you might have.

It actually seemed a crime to let such an easy bit of profit go by.

Spitz was no cracksman himself, but he was acquainted with a number of experts in that line who would be only too glad to be let in on such a snap, especially with the hints that he could give them. He had watched as closely as he dared while old man Hollister was setting the combination, and was almost certain he had it correctly.

By cripes, he thought as he walked along, if he only had Izzy Buffalo here, or Canister Mike, he'd be tempted to turn the trick.

It's an old saying that where there's a will there's a way; and the will being so strong with Mr. Darrel, the way naturally soon presented itself.

Lounging in front of a doorway, which to his sophisticated eye bore all the symptoms of a speak-easy, he saw, as he passed by, two rough-looking men, one of whom struck him as vaguely familiar. A second glance, and with a thrill of recognition he had spotted the fellow as Michigan Chimp, a yegg of various talents and a graduate from a dozen State prisons.

At the same time he was conscious, from a slight narrowing of the other's eyes, that the recognition was mutual.

No words passed between the pair; nothing beyond that brief interchange of glances. Spitz hesitated a second as he walked on, then with an almost imperceptible gesture signaled the yegg to follow him, and led the way to a bench in Hollister Park, where he sat down as if to rest.

Presently Michigan Chimp slouched up and took a seat on the same bench. Darrel turned a shoulder to him and feigned to be interested in the antics of a couple of squirrels a little distance away.

"How about a job for to-night?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

"What sort of a job?" inquired Chimp under cover of lighting his pipe.

"A rip, of course. That is, if you can call it a rip, with such a funny old box as this is."

"Nix, for mine," growled the yegg uninterestedly. "I'm off that box stuff for good. Too hard work; and if you're cornered, you're done for. I got a better lay than that, traveling around in an old flivver and sticking up pettin' parties on lonely roads. You can't lose at that. Not often, anyhow," he added, pulling down his sleeve to hide the bandage about his right wrist.

"And you can't lose at this," urged Spitz. "No petting party was ever so soft. Listen; there's thirty grand in Liberty Bonds lying there, just coaxing to be lifted. Fifteen grand for you, and fifteen for me; and practically nothing to do but walk in and take it."

Michigan Chimp shifted his position uneasily, and puffed hard at his pipe.

"I ain't got no soup," he muttered.

"You don't need any. All you've got to do in this case is twist the knob. I can give you the figures close enough for you to work out the combination."

"If it's as soft as that, what 're you cutting me in for?" The yegg shot a suspicious glance at him. "Why don't you rip it yourself?"

"Because I'd be the first one suspected. I saw the stuff put in the safe and the combination set. So I've got to have an absolutely straight alibi."

The other nodded, satisfied with the explanation.

"And all I've got to do, you say, is to twist the knob? How about getting piped off?"

"Gee, you're scary! Nothing to that, either. All you've got to watch out for is one old watchman. There may be some wires; but if they're anything like the rest of the layout, that oughtn't to bother you."

"Sounds too good to be true."

"I'll say so. One of those lucky chances you don't run into once in a blue moon."

Chimp reflected behind the malodorous smoke screen from his pipe.

"All right," he finally agreed. "I'll take it on. Now give me the dope."

When the two separated some ten or fifteen minutes later the yegg had in his possession a roughly sketched plan of the office, and also, as well as Spitz had been able to catch it, the formula for opening the safe.

The robbery, of course, would have to be pulled off that night; and it was arranged between them that Michigan Chimp should take the bonds to a hang-out he had back in the hills, where Darrel would come later, when it seemed safe, for a division of the spoils.

"And don't get it into your head that you can double cross me, old timer," admonished Spitz. "If you try anything like that I'll fasten the job on you and hunt you down until I land you. The Darrel Agency never gives up, you know, until it gets its man."

"Aw, what's eatin' you?" protested Chimp indignantly. "I'm a square shooter, I am."

"Well, I'm telling you, anyhow—just in case."

He flipped away the cigarette he had been smoking and, rising, sauntered out of the park and across the street over to the hotel.

At the desk he paused for a moment to speak to the clerk.

"What's doing in town to-night?" he asked.

"Well, the First Baptist Church is having a fair at the Armory."

"Thanks," rejoined Spitz. "Do I look like that?"

"Then the Glendale Dramatic Club is putting on a show at the Hollister Opera House. 'The Mikado.'"

"Hellup! Hellup!" Spitz threw up his hands.

"The Girls' Friendly Society is giving a cantata at the High School auditorium."

"Say, brother, are you trying to kid me? You mustn't think just because I come from New York you can steer me up against a lot of dizzy entertainments like that. I've got a reputation to protect."

"How about the movies?" suggested the clerk. "'The Covered Wagon' is at the Majestic, and Douglas Fairbanks in 'Robin Hood' at the Park."

"Takes me back to the days of my youth," murmured Spitz. "But you'll have to come again, I'm afraid. Isn't there some place where one can get an earful of jazz and shake a graceful hoof?"

"Certainly. I was coming to that. You can go out to the Lake. They have dancing there."

"Nice place?"

"Oh, yes. The best people in Glendale patronize it. There's a fifteen cent bus leaves the door here every hour up to midnight, or I can order you a taxi. That will cost you a dollar."

"The taxi for mine. Have it here for me at nine o'clock, will you?"

And thus having established his proposed whereabouts for the evening and laid the corner stone of his alibi, Spitz strolled on into the dining room.

From his table by the window he could

gaze out over to the park; and as he took his seat he saw Michigan Chimp knock the ashes from his pipe and shuffle away—a squat, swarthy figure, with unusually long arms and a queer, sailorlike gate that had been acquired as a deck hand on Lake Erie steamers.

Looking at him from the rear, it was not hard to understand the reason for the simian sobriquet that had been bestowed upon him.

"What could an ape like that do with fifteen thousand dollars?" thought Spitz disgustedly. "Five hundred would be big pay for all he's got to do. I'll have to figure some way of easing him out of the bulk of his cut."

But if the yegg had the awkward, ungainly appearance of a chimpanzee, he also had a certain apelike cunning, coupled with enormous strength and agility; and he, too, was figuring.

True, however, to the old adage of never counting chickens before they are hatched, he reasoned that the first thing was to get hold of the bonds.

The scene accordingly shifts to midnight; and Michigan Chimp, having approached the factory by a devious route, stands peering through a knot hole in the high board fence, as old Peter makes his rounds.

Then when the watchman's twinkling lantern had disappeared around the corner of a building, he reached up those long arms and, lightly as a feather, swung himself over into the yard.

Like a misshapen shadow he dodged swiftly through the darkness from cover to cover until he was crouching at the side of the office. A brief examination of the windows, and then, after a minute's expert work with a knife blade at one end of the catches, he was able to lift one of the sashes.

"This is too soft," he breathed in an uneasy whisper. "I'm gettin' scared of it."

Nevertheless, after a moment's hesitation, he hoisted himself inside and, closing the window behind him, made a rapid reconnoissance.

The arrangement of the place, he saw, was as Spitz had outlined it to him—the safe over beyond the railing and within range of only one of the windows. A glance to the outside showed him that old Peter was still far away, stumping leisurely along on the far side of the yard.

"Plenty of time," he grunted, "pervidin' nothing don't turn up, and them figgers he give me is anywhere near right."

Cautiously approaching the safe then, he examined it, top, sides and bottom, for burglar alarm connections; and satisfied at last that there was nothing of the kind to fear, kneeled down in front of it and began manipulating the knob according to the formula that had been given him.

Three times he tried it without success; one of the numbers was a little off. But by bending an ear to the clicks of the turning lock he was able to rectify this error, and on the fourth attempt the door swung open.

Reaching inside, he grabbed the package of bonds and, with a glance at its contents, transferred it to an inner pocket of his coat. It might have been well if he had stopped at that and, closing the safe, had made his get-away. But Michigan Chimp could not be content with anything less than a clean sweep.

He kept on prying and poking into the various compartments, and was just starting to empty a box of small change—nickles, dimes, and pennies—into his pocket, when he suddenly sprang to his feet with a muffled oath, and let the coins fall rolling and jingling to the floor.

A blaze of light had swept across his face; and for a moment his only thought was that the bulls had nabbed him redhanded.

Then, as his ear caught the grind of a motor on the roadway outside, and its squeal as the brakes were applied, he understood.

The disconcerting light had come from the headlamps of a car turning in at the gateway of the factory. He saw the machine, a classy roadster, halted just in front of the door, as he glanced quickly through the window, and a man climbing down from the driver's seat.

As a matter of fact, it was Rush, tired and worn from the delays and mishaps of

his drive up from New York. He had almost despaired of ever reaching home, so crawling had been his progress; but within the last hour the mysterious knock in the motor that had served to hold him back had somehow righted itself, and he had made the last twenty miles at a racing clip.

Still, midnight, he realized, is rather late to present one's self at a respectable household and he therefore decided, when he reached Glendale, to stop at the factory and telephone Beatrice of his return. Then she could let him know whether it was imperative that she should see him at once, or if to-morrow morning would do.

But Michigan Chimp naturally was not aware of all this. He knew only that some one was coming.

With a spring he was out over the railing and crouching at one side of the door. He made a half motion to draw his revolver, but, swiftly reconsidering, reached instead for a blackjack in the pocket of his coat. The noise of a shot might complicate his get-away.

There was a second or two of waiting, as Rush fumbled for his key ring. Then the lock clicked back and the door was pushed hurriedly open.

Wham! The yegg's long arm came down with the blackjack, and the heir apparent to Hollister's lay sprawled across the threshold of his citadel, inert and senseless.

Michigan Chimp, stepping over him, peered hurriedly out around the corner of the door to see if the incident had excited any attention. But apparently it had passed unnoticed. Both the factory yard and the street outside were as quiet as a country graveyard. Old Peter, his round completed, had glanced up as the roadster swept in at the gateway, and then recognizing it, had stepped back into his shanty to eat his lunch.

The Chimp leaned down to turn over the body of his unconscious victim; then paused at the sight of the bandage about his brow and the marks of recent battle on his face, and shot a glance at the roadster out in front of the door.

The same bozo, undoubtedly, that had given him such a vicious tussle four nights before. He had a score to settle with that duck.

Heaving Rush up in his arms as easily as a man of lesser strength might carry a baby, he dumped him into the roadster and drove away.

CHAPTER XVII.

CABS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT.

BEATRICE after dinner that evening declined an invitation to accompany Mr. and Mrs. Colfax to the movies, and went upstairs to her room.

She wanted to be alone, where she could think; for it is needless to say, that Jennifer's intimation of a possible visit to the town by Spitz Darrel had been a decided shock to her.

That telegram to Rush was worrying her, too. She wished now, she had not sent it. In view of Mr. Hollister's cordial manner when she left the office, it began to look as if she were dragging Rush back for no reason at all. All day, she had cowered in fear of what the boss would say to her; yet, when he had spoken, it had been merely to invite her to go with him and Jennifer to the lake.

She had simply let herself be overwhelmed by hysterical imaginings, she felt; and with a revulsion of mood, she now became almost recklessly optimistic.

Why fret herself over the Spitz Darrel business? That would prove only another bugaboo, she was certain. Jennifer had taken his protestations entirely too seriously. Small chance that he would leave his beloved Broadway to pursue a mere passing flirtation.

She had just reached this reassuring conviction when Sarah, the Colfax's maid, tapped on her door to announce that a gentleman was downstairs to see her.

"Who is it?" asked Beatrice.

"He didn't give no name, ma'am. Just said he'd been sent to you by Mr. Hollister."

To Beatrice, "Mr. Hollister," meant Rush; and thinking it must be some one with a message from him, she merely

stopped to smooth her hair, and hurried down.

Halfway into the parlor she advanced before recognition came to her. Then she stopped short as if frozen in her tracks.

It was Spitz Darrel!

For a full minute she stood rooted there, speechless, incapable of motion; then, with a shuddering gasp, she turned, and started to rush wildly from the room.

But with a quick stride, he placed himself between her and the door.

"Hold on a second," he stayed her. "I'm not going to harm you."

She halted, staring at him, her eyes slowly widening under an agonizing suspicion.

"The maid said"—her voice was scarcely more than a whisper—"that Mr. Hollister sent you here? Tell me; was that just a lie to get you in?"

What had occurred to her was that Rush might have fallen in with this fellow in New York, and have been deceived by his specious misrepresentations into believing the facts of their acquaintance less innocent than she herself had made out. If that were so, she was only sorry she did not have her automatic with her now. She would shoot straighter this time.

"A lie that Hollister sent me to you?" Darrel repeated her question. "Well, not altogether. The old fellow gave me your address, and told me you might be willing to talk engraving costs with me, if I called around."

"Oh?" Beatrice's heart gave such a leap at the recognition of her mistake that she involuntarily caught her breath. "Oh, I see? You are in the engraving business, then?"

Darrel laughed.

"In and out. No; you don't understand? That was just a convenient stall to get in and have a chat with you. But the old man kept me waiting so long, that you had gone home before I got a chance to speak to him. Still it's just as well, I guess." He gave a significant leer. "We're less apt to be overheard here.

"Better sit down." He motioned her toward a chair. "I've got quite a good deal to say to you, and—"

"You have nothing to say to me," she interrupted, chokingly, "for I will not listen to you."

She turned again as if to leave the room, but again he intercepted her.

"Now, see here!" He scowled, menacingly. "Don't you start getting up-stage with me, or you're going to regret it. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones; but you mustn't forget, my proud and haughty beauty, that I can put you in Sing Sing by merely lifting a finger."

In spite of herself, she paled at the threat, and wavered.

"There; that's better," he said, quick to read the signs of her irresolution. "Now, sit down like a good girl, and we'll get things fixed up in less than no time."

She hesitated, but in the end took the chair he pushed toward her.

"I hate to keep harping on unpleasant things"—he seated himself opposite her—"but I can hardly suppose you care to exchange your present surroundings for—" He interlaced his fingers into a semblance of bars, and held them in front of his face.

"Near as I can find out, you have it pretty easy here. A pleasant position, social recognition from the best people in the place, all the comforts and luxuries of life, and the—shall we say?—friendship of the richest young man in town."

She stiffened at the insinuation; but merely bit her lip and remained silent.

"Yet, it's all only a house of cards." He eyed her mockingly. "A house of cards, that I can send toppling with a breath."

"Oh!" She twisted her head tormentedly. "Can't you say what's in your mind, and be done with it?"

"I just wanted you to understand. Now," he changed to a brisker, more businesslike tone, "we'll get down to brass tacks. I'm in love with Jennifer Doane."

"In love?" Beatrice sneered.

"At any rate, I intend to marry her. And you are going to help me."

"I'd sooner take a knife and drive it to her heart. It would be a greater kindness."

"Maybe," he chuckled. "But it isn't what you'd rather do, that we are discussing. It's what you've got to do."

"You talk like an insane man," pro-

tested Beatrice. "Jennifer Doane is a free agent. How can I help you marry her?"

"In several ways. For one thing, you can tip me off how I really stand with her. Don't try to kid me, either, by saying you don't know. You're her closest pal, her confidante. She didn't come back from New London without spilling a lot to you of the way she felt about me."

"Well, I can tell you truthfully that she isn't in love with you," said Beatrice, hoping the unqualified statement might settle the matter.

But he merely shrugged his tailored shoulders.

"Oh, I know that," he said, indifferently. "She's not in love with me; but will she marry me? That's what I want to know. As I size her, she's sore right now. She's itching to show somebody something; and she don't give a whoop what it is. She'd slap a policeman in the face, or elope with a Chinaman—anything to kick over the traces. At least, that's my dope on her. How about it? Am I right, or wrong?"

Beatrice could not gainsay the accuracy of his diagnosis; but she affected to belittle any hopes of advantage he might be entertaining on the strength of it.

"Oh, you can't count on the caprices of a rich, high-spirited girl like Jennifer," she scoffed. "I know her pretty well. She blows hot and cold as the fancy seizes her; but underneath it, there's a vein of hard common sense. I don't believe she'd take any important step without considering it pretty carefully."

"Not if she had time to think," nodded Darrel. "But that's just what you and I must manage she shan't do. I am going to sweep her off her feet."

His words gave Beatrice an uneasy qualm. It was the same phrase that Jennifer had used—the thing, she had said, she was afraid of happening to her.

"Listen." Spitz drew his chair an inch or two closer. "I'll give you the low-down on this; so you can understand just where and how to back me up. I am planning to make a rush campaign of it, get me? Jennifer is out at the lake to-night; in half an hour I'll be there too. I'll dance with her, flatter her, play her with every jazzy trick I know. If I can work it, I'll swing her off to Albany or somewhere, and change her into Mrs. Darrel before morning.

"But I don't expect her to drop quite as easy as that," he admitted; "and if she doesn't, there's where I'll have need of you. She'll naturally come to you in the morning to talk me over, and she'll be starting to question and doubt and not be certain of her own feelings. And you've got to stop that by ballyhooing me to the limit. Don't let her think or figure for a minute. Boost me to her like a Florida real estate agent. Sell me to her every way you know how. Pretend to have fallen for me yourself, and make her jealous.

"But it's no use telling you what to do," he broke off; "every woman knows how to get another one going. Between us, if you play up to me right, we ought to have her down to the 'love, honor, and obey' stuff by day after to-morrow at the very latest.

"And there's also another point you've got to look after for me." He paused, his brows wrinkling in a frown. "When is Rush Hollister coming back?"

"I—I don't know exactly," faltered Beatrice. "He intended to be away a week, I think."

"Good; that gives me more than enough time. But if he should show up sooner, you've got to chase him right off again before he tumbles that I am here, or that anything is in the wind. Understand?"

"But suppose he won't go for me?" she argued. "Rush Hollister isn't so easy to persuade."

"Shucks!" He brushed aside her objection with a contemptuous gesture. "You know very well that all you've got to do is say the word, and he'd jump over the moon. That's up to you, though; I'm not dictating the method. But you've got to manage it somehow. For, if ever he gets wise, he'll crab my game sure."

Beatrice sprang up with a sudden flare of rebellion.

"I've heard enough—enough!" she declared, excitedly. "And I'll have nothing to do with your rotten scheme one way or the other. If Jennifer is fool enough to marry you, that's her lookout. She's of

age, and supposed to know her own mind. But you needn't count on any aid from me; for you'll not get it."

"All right." His eyes narrowed vindictively. "The sentence for attempted murder is from seven to ten years, I think. But have it your own way. May I use the telephone a moment, please?"

Without waiting for her permission, he stepped out to the instrument in the hall and started to lift the receiver.

"What are you going to do?" she quavered.

"Call up a motor cop named Reeder, I met this afternoon. He had your number, never fret; but I steered him off by insisting that the identification was all wet. Now, when I correct my statement, he'll probably lose no time in getting here and putting you under arrest. That thousand-dollar reward looks pretty sweet to him."

"No! No!" She rushed out into the hall, and clutched imploringly at his arm. "Don't call him up. I'll—I'll do as you say."

He tortured her a moment by pretending to hesitate; then stepped away from the telephone.

"All right," he conceded, picking up his hat. "We'll let it go at that. But see that you stick to your bargain. Try any welching tricks with me, and I'll put you over the jumps so quick that it 'll make your hair curl."

As the hall door closed on him at last, Beatrice tottered back and collapsed on a couch in the hall, where she lay with her head buried in her hands until she heard on the porch the footsteps of Mr. and Mrs. Colfax returning from the movies, and dragged herself up to meet them.

"Mrs. Colfax," she said, huskily, "I've had bad news, and shall have to leave at once. I won't have time to pack anything but a bag, if I want to catch the eleven fifty for Albany; but I'll write and tell you where to send my things. I—I don't think I'll be coming back."

That, she had decided, was the only thing that she could do—leave town, and let fate straighten out the tangled coil of things in Glendale as best it could. Where she would go to hide herself she had no idea, or what she would do to live. But she could not bring herself to staying there and aiding Spitz Darrel in his mercenary plot; and neither could she face the consequences of opposing him.

A half hour later she came downstairs dressed for the journey and with her bag in her hand; and having bade Mrs. Colfax good-by, she set off for the station in a taxi.

It was a ride of poignant recollections. The familiar, small-town blocks and corners took on a sort of charm as she passed them. She had much to remember that was pleasant in Glendale. More than once she had to press her handkerchief to her eyes, as a shop or site recalled some gay or interesting episode of her life there.

Arriving at the station a little early for her train, she felt unable to breathe in the stuffy waiting room, and went outside to walk up and down on the platform. The very planks under her feet evoked memories, bringing back to her mind a picture of herself on the day she had first come to the town, forlorn, friendless, frightened, a fugitive. How quickly the difficulties had all been smoothed away. How soon she had been made to feel at home. As Darrel said, things had certainly been made easy for her there. And she could see that it was all due to the influence of the Hollisters and of Jennifer Doane.

What a miserable return she was making for all the kindness and generosity that had been shown her? Sneaking off to save her own skin, and never lifting a hand to spare Rush and his father the trouble and heartache that was bound to come to them with the success of Darrel's plans? Leaving Jennifer in the lurch at the very hour when the girl most needed a friend? Was that playing fair? Was it anything less than base and cowardly ingratitude?

A vision rose before her of the dancing floor at the lake, with Jennifer and Darrel circling gracefully through the throng of dancers. The subtle intoxication of motion and music and June was stealing Jennifer's senses away. With his perfectly attuned step, and rhythmic sway, Darrel was weaving his spell about her, meanwhile, no doubt, whispering to her, playing upon her

dissatisfied, rebellious mood, challenging her reckless spirit. It would seem to the girl, as she listened, as she followed his artful leading, that they, too, might go dancing through life like this in absolute harmony and unison.

Perhaps already she was yielding to the sorcery of it, being swept off her feet. And then, what an awakening awaited her!

"No! No!" Beatrice flung her hand before her eyes, as if to blot out the vision. The remonstrance burst unbidden from her lips. "I can't allow it. I've got to stop her, no matter what happens."

She turned as she spoke, and stepping inside the station, left her bag at the check room, and came out again. The same taxi that had brought her there was waiting at the side of the building.

The driver, seeing her start to get in, hurried over from the lunch counter, cramming the rest of a half eaten sandwich into his mouth.

"Forget something, ma'am?" he asked. "Or change your mind about going? Back to the house, I suppose?"

"No," she said hoarsely. "Take me out to the lake, and drive for all you are worth."

It was just about this time that, out at the lake, Mr. Hollister was called to the telephone.

The manufacturer had not enjoyed a wholly satisfactory evening. He had planned this little outing in the hope of dispelling the peculiar, freakish humor which Jennifer had been displaying for over a week past. He had thought that one of the little, intimate, congenial parties he and she used to have before Eustace and Rush were around would just about fill the bill; and he had chosen the lake because some of their most pleasant times together had been there.

But to-night things didn't seem to work out as he had planned. Hardly was dinner over and he and Jennifer out together on the floor, when this engraving company man, Darrel, had turned up and proved to be an acquaintance of Jennifer's.

After that, Mr. Hollister's opportunities of dancing with his ward were decidedly curtailed. Almost before he and Jennifer would get well started off he'd find this smooth New Yorker cutting in on him; and what was worse, he couldn't help seeing that Jennifer didn't object to the change. She was hardly to be blamed, he supposed; the fellow was certainly spry on his feet and he had a lot of fancy steps. But there was no denying it had just about wrecked his own evening.

But his grievance on this score was forgotten when, on answering that telephone call, he heard old Peter's voice excitedly stuttering:

"We've been robbed, Mr. Hollister. Somebody broke into the office and cleaned out everything that was in the safe."

The manufacturer dashed from the telephone booth and out to the dancing floor. As he reached the big hall he spied Darrel lounging in the doorway and grabbed him. Jennifer was dancing with another partner.

"Listen, young man!" Mr. Hollister exclaimed jerkily. "I've just heard there's been a burglary at the plant, and I've got to beat it right back to town. You see that Jennifer gets safely home, won't you? Tell her I've left her car for her."

Then, without waiting to listen to Darrel's suave expressions of concern, he tore out of the place and down the front steps, yelling "Taxi! Taxi!" in a voice that could have been heard a mile away.

About halfway to town the cab he boarded passed the one which had been engaged by Beatrice. But of course neither he nor she knew who the other person was who was driving so furiously through the night, or what was the incentive for it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TAKING A TAXI.

BEATRICE, from the doorway of the dancing hall, looked over the crowd of bobbing figures for some sign of Jennifer, and caught sight of her at last, seated at a table over on the other side of the floor, sitting out the number with Darrel.

But the observant Spitz had spied

Beatrice before she saw them; and, quick to surmise the nature of her mission, began to throw up entrenchments.

"For the love of Mike!" he exclaimed. Then he leaned excitedly toward the flushed and glowing girl across the table.

"Don't let her know that you are looking," he said; "it might frighten her away. But when you get a chance, steal a glance at that woman over in the doorway with her hat on. That is Beatrice Gore, the blackmailer who tried to kill me. What in Sam Hill do you suppose she can be doing here?"

Jennifer, after a moment, did as he bade, and began to laugh.

"Your lamps are off to-night, old dear," she railed. "That girl isn't any blackmailer. It is Helen Baker, the wonder child of the advertising department, whom you said you tried to interview this afternoon. See—she is beckoning to me. Come on over and I'll introduce you to her."

But he laid a detaining hand on her wrist as she started to rise.

"Wait just a minute," he said gravely. "I am sure I can't be mistaken. How long has this Miss Baker been in Glendale?"

"How long?" Jennifer puckered her brows in the effort to remember. "Why—I don't know exactly. Or, yes, I do. She came here about the same time as Rush and Eustace Blake. That was in February."

"And it was in February," observed Darrel significantly, "that I was shot, and Beatrice Gore vanished from New York."

Jennifer stared at him, her eyes slowly widening. A score of questionable circumstances recurred to her that she had never questioned before—the girl's odd secretiveness, the suspicions Hollister had voiced to her, the copy of the telegram to Rush which she had seen in the wastebasket.

"But you don't seriously mean—" she gasped. "Why, it's absurd."

"I don't wonder that you think so." He nodded. "Beatrice Gore is one of the most dangerous women in the country. She can trot in any company and get away with it. I only hope she hasn't put over anything while she has been here."

Jennifer thought uneasily of the wording of that telegram to Rush: "Unless you return and square me somehow, I will be forced to tell everything."

"And let me beg of you, Miss Doane," Darrel urged with a protective air, "not to have anything further to do with this masquerading crook. I don't want you dragged into a scandal; and, as I happen to know, the police are close upon Beatrice Gore's trail. I was told of the tip they had, that she was hiding in an up-State town; but I never dreamed that I would find her here, brazening it out under your protection. Why, she may be arrested to-night."

"But what shall I do?" appealed Jennifer, in a flutter. "She is coming around here now, to try to speak to me. See—she is clear over on this side of the hall already."

"Let us dance," said Darrel, rising hastily; and before Beatrice could reach the table where they sat he had taken the girl in his arms and swept her out among the fox trotting couples.

But they had not completed a half circuit of the hall before they were halted by one of the uniformed attendants of the place.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Miss Doane," he said; and, accompanied by Darrel, Jennifer left the floor and followed the man toward the booths.

It was the elder Hollister, she found, who wanted to speak to her.

"Do you know where Rush is, Jennifer?" he asked in a queer sort of voice.

"Rush?" she repeated in surprise. "Why, in New York, isn't he?"

"No. Apparently he came back to-night. At least, Peter insists that he drove up to the factory about midnight. I suppose young Darrel told you that I was called back to town by the news that our safe had been robbed? It upset me considerably, as I had left thirty thousand dollars' worth of Liberty Bonds in there overnight. But there was no robbery. It's true the safe was open and the bonds gone, but it wasn't the work of burglars. Some one had been there who knew the combination, and that can only mean Rush or myself.

"The way I figure it," he went on, "is that Rush came back, and, finding the

bonds in the safe, or being told about them by Miss Baker—I remember she was standing right behind me when I put them away—thought that it was too risky to leave them there, and took them in charge himself. I tried to telephone Miss Baker, but Mrs. Colfax told me she had left town tonight and isn't coming back."

"Left town?" exclaimed Jennifer.

"So Mrs. Colfax said. Funny, isn't it, that she should have gone off that way without a word to any of us? The whole thing is a puzzle to me." He spoke in a baffled tone.

"Of course, it's all right. No one could have taken the bonds but Rush. Peter swears he couldn't be mistaken in the car; he says it drove up to the factory, stopped a few minutes, and then drove off again. But the boy must have been in an awful hurry; for he left the safe door open and a lot of small change scattered all over the office floor. And what gets me is, what has become of him?

"I've telephoned every place I could think of, and finally decided to call you up on the chance that he might be out there, or that you knew something about him. It bothers me not to know what he's done with those darned bonds, or if he still has them with him that he should be skylarking around to roadhouses."

Jennifer made some noncommittal response and replaced the receiver on the hook. For a moment she was unable to leave the booth, but had to lean against the side of it, so dazed and horrified was she by what she had heard.

The thing was plain as print to her now. That telegram sent to Rush was the desperate demand of a blackmailer. "Situation becoming critical." That meant the woman must have learned, as Darrel said, that the police had a tip on her whereabouts.

Evidently, too, she had something on Rush; and when he raced back and tried to pacify her, she had told him of those Liberty Bonds in the safe and insisted that he get them to square her before she fled from town. The leaving of the safe door open and the scattering of small change about the floor was to suggest a robbery; but how clumsy of the fool to use his own car!

"Poor old Dads!" she thought. "He has his suspicions, too, I can see, but is fighting against them. He won't confess, even to himself, that Rush could be a thief. Oh, that beastly girl! After all we've done for her, to deal such a slam to Dads, the squarest man alive. Why, it will almost kill him when he finds out the truth.

"But, by heck, he isn't going to find it out!" Jennifer winked back her tears as she grew tense with the protective fury of the female of the species for those she loves. "She'll discover she hasn't got a softy like Rush to deal with now. I'll get those bonds out of her if I have to take her apart and scatter her all over the garage floor to do it. Then I'll give her the bum's rush out of town and make Rush take back the bonds with a plausible explanation and Dads will never know the difference at all."

Her head high, her eyes gleaming with vindictive purpose, she swung out of the booth and seized Darrel by the arm.

"Where is that woman?" she demanded. "Take me to her. I've got a little piece to speak."

"Why, I think she's left." He was inwardly congratulating himself on the fact. Enough time had already been wasted over this fool interruption. "I saw her going out the door about three minutes ago."

"Left?" Jennifer caught him by the hand and pulled him toward the entrance. "Hurry! We've got to catch her before she gets away."

But although they ran clear out to the roadway and questioned half a dozen persons, no trace of Beatrice could they find. The doorman remembered seeing her pass him, but had not noticed which direction she took; and no one else apparently had taken any heed of her at all.

There was really nothing very surprising in that, for, as it happened, Beatrice had sought to escape observation. When she saw Jennifer and Darrel quit their table at her approach, she realized at once that Darrel must have told his story, and that Jennifer, prejudiced by it, was trying to evade her; and she paused, uncertain what move to make next.

Then, over the heads of the dancers, she caught a glimpse of the pair heading toward the telephone booths. Owing to the intervening crowds, she had missed seeing the attendant give his summons to Jennifer, and so concluded that their purpose in leaving the floor was to let Darrel call up Reeder and have her arrested.

Fear gripped her, not so much at the idea of arrest—she had steeled herself to that—but the thought of failing in her mission.

Taken away by the police, she would have no chance to warn Jennifer, to raise that question of doubt which, even if she were not believed, might act as a brake on the girl's impulsiveness. Instead, Darrel, swaggering in triumph, would have free scope to weave his spell, and, the odds were, would win.

She had not failed to notice the sparkle of excitement in Jennifer's eye, a certain tinge of abandon in her manner, and knew that Jennifer was in no mood to be trusted to keep her head.

Under the exigency, Beatrice's wits were spurred to action. A plan suggested itself to her; and without stopping to debate it, she hurried from the big hall and out toward the entrance.

The doorman stepped forward, touching his finger to his cap.

"Shall I call your car, Miss Baker?"

"No, thank you; I am not leaving yet."

Controlling her pace, she went on more slowly down the steps; but at the bottom, after glancing back over her shoulder to make sure that she wasn't watched, she turned sharply and dodged around the corner of the house into a clump of shrubbery. Then bending low in the shadow she made her way swiftly back to where the cars were parked.

The taxi in which she had come from town, and which she had ordered to wait for her, was fourth from the end of the line. The driver was nowhere in sight, but, swinging back the door, she climbed inside and crouched down upon the floor.

No one would look for her there, she felt sure. It would be a safe hiding place for her until Jennifer and Darrel came out to take their departure. Then she would intercept them and force Jennifer to listen to her. If she could do nothing else, she might at least persuade the headstrong girl to wait until Rush came home.

That was the one trump card she had to play. Darrel, she knew, dreaded the return of Rush above everything else, believing that it must inevitably crab his game.

She settled herself to wait; but it was only a minute or two until she heard Jennifer's voice outside, and, peeping from the window of the cab, saw Darrel and the girl come running down the steps and go searching about over the lawn.

She had an opportunity now to speak to them if she chose to take it; but she delayed, hoping they would approach nearer, and while she waited they passed out of sight around to the other side of the house.

There was a parking ground there also; but as neither of the pair wore a hat, she did not give a thought to that until she saw Jennifer's roadster suddenly come shooting out along the driveway and down toward the main road.

As the little car swept through the blaze of illumination about the front of the roadhouse, she could plainly make out the figures of the two and the leer of triumph on Darrel's face as he turned it toward the girl.

With a gasp of dismay Beatrice flung herself out of the cab and ran toward the driveway; but she had not covered half a dozen steps before she realized the futility of overtaking the speeding car, and, turning, dashed back to her taxi.

Wildly she gazed around. Her driver was nowhere in sight, and she knew that by the time she could have him summoned from the chauffeur's room minutes must elapse. Already the roadster had turned into the main highway and, under Jennifer's break-neck driving, was steadily gaining speed.

There was really only one thing Beatrice could do in the emergency, and she did it. Swinging herself up into the driver's seat, she slammed her foot down on the self-starter, threw the taxi's engine into gear, and set off in pursuit.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Green-Eyed

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

WOMAN may be only a necessary evil, but the fact remains that she *is* necessary, thus conclusively closing out cynic's conclusions. Bachelors can continue cataloguing the beauties of single blessedness. Men, mammas, and the ministry are welcome to fill the columns of America's magazines and newspapers on the Menace of the Modern Flapper at a cent a word and up.

But the fact remains that the female is still a factor in the world of men. Barbers, florists, and diamond dealers prove that.

Nope, you can't tell little Fanny Friedman. Professional bachelors notwithstanding, they is three women in the life of every normal man—the woman who bears him, the woman who pairs with him, and the woman who snares him; in other words, mother, wife, and sugar baby.

In act one of his life drama the first firmly believes she is all in all. In act two, the first and second wage silent war to determine which is all in all. And in act three, the first and second combine against the third, hoping to save at least a half of that all in all between 'em.

Funny, ain't it? No, I take that back. It ain't so funny. The Battle of the Three Women is the cruelest thing on earth, while the object of it, Mere Man, moves on in his own sweet way, as unconscious of the stir around him as a piece of the common territory in a war amongst nations.

It's took me twenty-one years to dope out these deductions, but I formed most of 'em the first day that Fred and me breezed back from our hasty hitching and honeymoon.

"We'd better mosey over to mom's and let her lamp you, sweetness," decided my new husband as he delved into our snappy traveling leather and attempted extracting his ties from an assortment of my personal pink pretties. "She gets Saturday afternoon off and never goes no place, so I think we'd better sub over and demonstrate the dimples of her daughter-in-law. That telegram I sent from Atlantic City was kinda hasty, and I couldn't do you no justice whatsoever. At one half buck per ten words, even a bridegroom would leave out a few of his wife's charms."

I kissed him for that, but sorta dubious.

"All right," I sighed, "I'll go. But do you think she'll like me, Fred?"

He laid down a tangle of collars and camisoles and glared.

"Sure!" he yelped. "Why wouldn't she like you? Didn't *I* pick you out?"

I gulped and held my peace. I was learning that much already.

"Well, then, what'll I wear?" I asked, meek. "I want to look awful stylish, Fred, but not too gay. What's your mother like? Is she old-fashioned?"

"Wear anything," ordered my husband with assurance. "All I gotta do is say, 'Ain't Fanny's dress pretty, mom?' and whether you look like Ziegfeld's front row or the last row in a bohunk employment office she'll answer, 'Yes, Freddie.'"

"Gee, but your mother must think you're the oyster's ankles!" I marveled.

He laughed at that and bent to kiss me.

"Now, snake into something," he commanded, "and we'll go show mamma what her little boy brung home!"

Mrs. Friedman herself inserted a nose through the front door of her Bronx flat, and lamping Freddie flung wide the portals and pulled him down to her with a kind of desperate embrace, accompanied by a series of inane sobs that would of had the prodigal son leaving home again. Then she kissed him—on the skin I love to touch, on the lips that had seemed all mine, even in the little hollow under his manly jaw, of which I had been kidding myself I was the sole discoverer. And my heart pulled three ways.

I was learning what every wife has to learn that comes, confident she is the only woman. There is *one* that is always before you.

Fred gently untangled her fluttering hands from his topknot with a "Now, now, mom!" and turned to include me in the sweet domestic scene.

"Mother," he introduced, sheepish but proud, "this is Fanny!"

The other Mrs. Friedman faced me.

Into her eyes leaped a look of defiance and her hand sought Fred's, proprietary. Then her gaze narrowed, and run the height of me, from my new fall sport hat to my red sport sandals.

"How—how are you, Mrs. Friedman?" I broke the silence, cordial as I could. "I'm glad to meet—Fred's mother."

Fred let go her hand and come to put an arm around me, tender. She winced.

"My wife!" he announced, squeezing me cute. "My wife, mom!"

"I ain't disputing that," she said, her nostrils acting like a bellows. "I got your telegram."

"Your daughter, too!" went on Fred, gay, and not whiffing the smoke of battle.

"A son was all I ever bore," she stated.

Silence hung.

"Oh, Mrs. Friedman!" I butt in, impulsive. "I know I'm only Fred's bride, and maybe I shouldn't have married him so quick without asking you, but now that we are, *couldn't* you like me?"

"Of course mom likes you!" smiled Fred, genial. "Can we come in, mom? Take off your hat, Fanny, and we'll stay to supper. I should of told you that we was coming to-day, mom, and you would have had baked beans, wouldn't you? Gee, you oughtta taste mom's beans, hon."

Mrs. Friedman grunted and turned toward the kitchen, as though she couldn't bear to see the way Freddie was looking into my eyes.

"It won't take a minute to warm 'em over," she muttered. "They been baking all day. I *thought* maybe you'd come, now that you're through—honeymooning."

"Oh, but we ain't!" laughed my husband, kissing me. "Are we, baby?"

"Sh, Fred!" I cautioned, wriggling from his arms. "Your mom don't like you to—touch me."

"Say!" he exclaimed. "Can't a guy kiss his own wife?"

"Not when his mother is looking," I observed, sage but sorrowful. "It makes her feel bad."

"You women!" he teased, good-natured. "Hey, mom!" he bellowed in the direction of the kitchen, "ain't supper ready?"

Mrs. Friedman wouldn't let me aid her at all. Is there anybody so helpless as a woman in another woman's kitchen when she ain't allowed to do nothing? She shooed me to the sofa with Fred and talked to him constant through the door.

"Put on your winter weights next week, Freddie," she called above the hiss of frying bacon. "It's getting cool."

"I don't think he needs them just yet, Mrs. Friedman," I contradicted, gentle. "It's only September."

"He *always* puts 'em on by the fourteenth," insisted my mother-in-law.

"Well, he's a man now," I answered, hot

"Yes, and he never would of lived to *be* one if *I* hadn't took care of him," she come back with sour pride.

"Gonna have gingerbread for dessert?" put in Fred, knocking his cigarette against the taboret.

"Yes, Freddie boy," she cooed, her voice brightening and becoming soft, as it always did when she spoke to him. "Oh, you got ashes all over. Bad boy!" she beamed from the doorway.

"You shouldn't do that, dear," I scolded my spouse with wifely discipline. "Getting your dirty ashes all over your mother's real mahogany table!"

"That's all right!" snapped Mrs. Friedman. "This is Freddie's home, and he can do what he likes in it."

I subsided.

We set down to supper, Fred close to his mother and me isolated at the other end of the table.

"How are you coming down to Roseman's, mom?" inquired our joint man, in between forkfuls of beans.

"Fine, Freddie," she smiled. "I'm promoted to head saleslady on our floor. Got a little raise, too," she added, lower, "and if you want—"

"Aw, gee, mom," blushed Fred, "that's great! But I shouldn't take it. And I wouldn't, only Fanny wants a heavy coat for winter—" he left off significant.

"Guess I couldn't spare none, though," she returned, graying into a stone statue. "The rent's due, and I'm only a lone working woman. *I* ain't got a nice husband to pamper *me!*"

I choked on a forkful of his mother's famous baked beans.

"Any news, mom?" went on Fred, still bright under the gathering war clouds.

"Well, your friend, Mr. Gowdy, said he was moving West for a better position and left good-by, and that girl, Molly What's-her-name, and that you was always running around with, came in the other day and asked for you. I told her you was married suddenly. She has a new automobile her father gave her, and I guess she wanted to take you riding. She looked real cute. I always did think she was a pretty girl, but she looks better every day, now that her father can afford to dress her so handsome."

Fred's face swam in a tidal wave of red, and he shot a look at me, anxious, but my eyes went to my plate, and I saw with only that third orb that a loving woman possesses.

"Oh, Molly Bern!" he said, careless. "Sure, I remember little Molly Bern—great kid!"

"You *ought* to remember her," stated Mrs. Friedman, solemn.

My skin pricked, little heat waves playing on my scalp. But I didn't look up once, though I knew Fred's eyes was hovering desperate between his mother's and mine.

"What kind of a car has she?" he inquired, pleasant but cool.

"I don't know exact. It was a big one, long and blue and classy."

"Mr. Bern must be packing in the pennies nowadays," he observed, lame. "I'll have to trot over and see him."

"Huh, *him!*"

"Fanny, don't you want some more of mom's nice beans, dear?" asked Fred, suddenly solicitous. "They're good, ain't they? Better ask mom how to make 'em."

"She'll learn by herself," commented Mrs. Friedman, and added, significant: "She'll probably learn *everything* before long."

The remark chilled me.

Silence.

"Want some more beans, Freddie?" asked the Other Woman, her voice changing from stern to warm. "Mother's got some hot in the oven."

"All right," agreed Fred, passing over his plate, still sheepish.

"Let *me* take it out, Mrs. Friedman," I begged. "Let *me* get them for Fred." At that moment I felt that even being allowed to get near enough to my husband to bring him beans would have cured something of the awful ache that itched my heart.

But she wouldn't let me serve him.

"I've been waiting on him twenty-three years, all but one week," she said, sullen and haughty, "and I guess I can keep on. "Do you want some more pork with 'em, Freddie?" she asked, gentle "Or could I fry you another nice strip of bacon?"

"I ain't feeding Freddie too much pork and bacon," I informed her, cool. "It's bad for him, and he breaks out with it this weather."

"Just how long have you been feeding my son?" she inquired.

"Only to-day," I answered, abashed. "You see, we just got back and ain't really set up housekeeping yet."

"Huh, you cooked for him to-day?"

"Yes, breakfast and lunch."

"You look a little pale, Freddie."

"I'm all right," he said, almost sensing the storm now. "Fanny's a great cook. She made a wonderful salad for lunch—almost as good as your beans, mom," he added, hasty, but gallant.

"Humph, salad isn't cooking," scorned Mrs. Friedman. "If your wife is going to give you delicatessen diet why don't you recommend Mr. Bern? His store is right near you, ain't it?"

Of a sudden tears brimmed in my eyes, and I felt I just couldn't bear no more.

"Freddie," I begged, "let's go home. We got to finish unpacking, and we—won't get to bed till late."

Mrs. Friedman quivered and looked away.

Fred sought her hand.

"All right, boy," she choked, "if she—wants to take you—away from me."

There was an awful sadness in her voice that might even have touched my heart if it hadn't been so wounded.

I dug in the worn old sofa for my sport hat, while Fred's mother held his for him out in the dim hall. And as I come through the parlor curtains I saw him lift her up while her arms went tight around his neck.

"Oh, Freddie, baby!" she was breathing. "Are you happy, boy? Mother wants you to be happy. She'd give her useless old life, boy, to make you happy. She'd lay right down and die for you. Remember that, Freddie—no matter what."

"I *am* happy, mom," protested Fred, irritated as all men are by feminine demonstrations. "Leggo my ear! Sure, mom, I'm happy. Fanny's wonderful, ain't she?"

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, Freddie, if *you* think so."

"I knew you'd like her," beamed my husband, well satisfied. "Here she is now. Are you all set to go home, sweetheart? Home!" he repeated, glory and wonder in his voice.

"Home!" echoed Mrs. Friedman, desolate. "Well, good night, Freddie. Oh, mother's boy!" She gripped him again, frantic, as though he was scheduled for an airplane trip to the North Pole. Gently he loosed her. "Good night," she said to me, formal.

At the head of the stairs we looked back as she stood in the doorway, her white hair pale in the gaslight, her old blue house dress caught at the throat with a cameo, her feet slumping in their mousy slippers. Pathetic she was, but proud.

"Don't forget to put on your woolens next week, Freddie!" she called with final defiance, and shut the door.

II.

Suspicion is worse than actual knowledge. You can deal with facts, but you can only wait on supposition. In the weeks that followed, when Freddie would come home to his evening meal and the joys of domesticity, I would make his life miserable by shooting him a series of careful questions that circled around the main one like an ambitious but amateurish kitten does a mouse. I couldn't quite make up my mind to tackle the main point.

And all the while doubt and jealousy festered in my heart. I snooked and sneaked and sleuthed till I almost got so I wished I *would* find out something. Anything rather than this watchful waiting.

I loved Freddie. As I brung in his supper and passed the back of his chair I wanted to rumple his hair. Sitting at the other end of the table, I felt like suddenly tipping the whole thing over—dishes, blue flower bowl and all—and rushing into his consoling arms.

But something held me back. Pride. Jealousy and pride, there ain't much difference between 'em. A humble spirit is thankful for the crumbs it gets. A proud one wants the whole loaf, and is jealous if it has to be shared.

But I held my peace, though my heart

was beating to the notes of a dead march. What was *she* like? If I could only see her! In my darkness of mind I pictured her as being everything I wasn't—wearing the handsome clothes I longed for, driving around in a big blue automobile with *him* beside her.

No, I couldn't picture that!

If I could only of seen her I might have found out that her hair wasn't naturally curly or that she was hippo-hipped, or that she had thick ankles. But my mental images made her a paragon of pep and prettiness.

It wasn't till a month after our friendly little visit at my fond mother-in-law's that I was finally armed for action. Even in married life there has to be an excuse for war.

Mine comes one evening when Fred hied home extra peppy, said he didn't want much supper, and retired to the bathroom, whence emerged various noises of cleanliness.

"What're doing, dear?" I called. "You only shaved this morning."

"Can't a he-man shave twice?" he grumbled.

"No man shaves twice a day without reason, my love," I cooed, alert with suspicion. "And I don't mind the shaggy jawbone. So what's the idea?"

"I'm going out," he stated, blunt.

"Oh!" I tittered. "Where?"

"Over to see a friend."

"You have them, then," I commented, malicious. "Well, how about spending the evening with 'friend' wife?"

"I gotta go see some of my pals," he insisted, spunky, "now that we're all over honeymooning."

"All over!" I echoed, forlorn.

"Sure. You can't expect a real guy to sit on the sofa and spoon forever," he complained, above the rasp of the razor.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, taken aback, then snapped, "Well, who started it, anyhow, Mr. Friedman?"

"Huh?"

"Who used to toddle over every evening, park on little Miss Fanny Coons's sofa, and settle down till the cows come home. Who?"

"It was different in them days," he said. "We wasn't married then. Now I gotta have a little recreation. So I'm just gonna slide over to the Bern's and see—"

"See who?"

"Mr. Bern. So you sit tight, honey, and sew on something. Maybe I'll bring home something nice from the store—a cut of bologna. You like that, don't you?"

"Yes," I assented, wearily. "A cut. That's all I ever gets, cuts. And Lord knows, my life is nothing but a lot of bologna. The family lives over the store, don't they?"

"Yeh, but they're gonna move uptown soon."

"Oh, and who told you that?"

Come the steady scrape of the razor. Leading question number one unanswered!

"Well, I hope they move soon," I remarked, sullen.

"Why?"

"Oh, they must be a common lot, them Berns. Nothing but emigrants. The neighborhood's just as good off without 'em. Their kind never did lend nothing to a community. They grow rich off'n their neighbors, and then wallow in money they don't know what to do with. They're nothing but a bunch of cheap ikes."

"Oh, is that so?" come back Fred, hot. "Well, they're good enough for me."

"That's what I meant when I said they was a common lot."

"Say, are you calling me common?" he blazed. "Well, then, what did you pick me up for?"

"I didn't pick you up," I contradicted, vehement. "How could I? *I* ain't got no rich father that hands me out blue automobiles."

"So that's it?" he intoned, significant. "You're jealous of their car? And I suppose you're gonna nag me till I get you one like it."

"Yeh," I chortled. "I'm jealous of their —car."

"Well, Mr. Bern might invite you out once in a while if you acted nice to Mrs. Bern. But I'm scared to introduce you to her. You women!"

"Does he drive it a lot?" I asked, suddenly pleasant.

"Naw; he's at the store 'most all day."

"Well, you can't tell me Mrs. Bern takes it out. I bet she couldn't drive it ten feet without ramming a row of telegraph poles,

hydrants and lamp-posts. Do they have a chauffeur?"

"I don't know."

"Why? Ain't you been out in it?"

"Yeh. Say, where are my collar buttons—the pearl ones you gave me last Christmas? Remember how you surprised me with them, dear? Gosh, but you were the sweet baby! I didn't expect anything at all and up you walk with a little box behind you, shy, shoves it into my unconscious fists and says, 'Here's a present for you, Fred.' Gee, weren't you cute! And you give me something else, too—remember? Under the mistletoe? Gee, but you used to be the sweet baby!"

"Used to be!"

"You are now. If I wasn't all soapy I'd come out there and hand you a kiss that would curl your eyebrows."

"Thanks for the kind and gentle thought, honey. Now, did you use your nice, new shaving cologne? I know Mr. Bern must be a man of delicate and sensitive tastes. and how about your new silk tie? Men are so fastidious about their male callers, and Mr. Bern would just fall all over a stunning tie like your silk one. And how about your new Oxford shirt? You gotta be awful careful what you wear around your *bosom* friends. Oh, dear, yes!"

"Are you kidding me?" inquired my husband, emerging from the bathroom and patting his pink cheeks with a sweet-smelling towel.

"What an odd insinuation!" I tittered. "Here, baby boy o' mine. Let me wrestle with your tie. My only husband must be beautiful to-night. He's going to see his dear, sweet little Mr. Bernssy-wernsey. Give him my love, dearest."

"How can I give him your love, Fanny?" he asked, sober and pathetic, "when I ain't got it myself?"

My heart leaped and I almost ran to his arms.

"You've been so cold to me lately, dear," he said, humble.

"Well," I mimicked, freezing again, "you can't expect a real woman to sit on the sofa and spoon forever, can you? Goodnight, sweetheart. I won't wait up. When two men get to talking under a soft, romantic lamp shade there's no telling when they'll break up. And oh, Freddie mine, of course I understand that Mr. Bern uses face powder, so don't waste no time outside our door trying to brush it off. Come right in and make yourself to home. Tra la, toodle-de-oo and all that!"

This was a sample of what we went through every night. And Freddie got more and more haggard, and I got as touchy as Venice de Milo would with an itch. And, like her, I couldn't just put my finger on things.

Freddie got to running over to his mother's, and it hurt me to think that she could soothe him when I wouldn't.

Things finally come to a show-down, though, the day when I toddled home from the corner dairy with Freddie's evening meal under my arm, and beheld him disembark from a limousine at our corner. And the car was long and blue with a uniformed guy in front, and in the back seat was a female figure wrapped close in a luscious silver fox that *Othello* would have just loved to choke his *Desdemona* with. Gee, it must of cost a fortune, at least two hundred bucks!

My heart turned to lead. Nevertheless, I caught up with Freddie, smiled cordial, and said "Good evening!"

He started.

"Oh, hello, dear—it's you."

"Only me."

"Going home?"

"Yeh, I'm going right home and prepare a nice evening meal for my poor tired husband that has to battle his way through the awful subway crush every evening."

"It *was* pretty bad to-night," he agreed.

My bosom became stone. He could deceive me!

"But I got a lift at the exit," he added, and even through my hurt I loved him for that extra sentence that saved him from a lie.

"Oh, you got a lift," I murmured. "That was nice. Oh, that was lovely. And where are you going now?"

"Why, home," he answered.

"Home? Really? Well, not to mine, faithful one."

"Fanny, what's the matter?" he begged.

"Oh, nothing, really, only I don't see how you have the nerve even to enter my house."

"All right, then," he muttered, sullen, "if you don't want me. I'll go over to the corner dairy, where I can eat in peace."

"Then take this with you," I cooed, affable, handing him my package. "I got this there in the first place—cold potato salad and dill pickles. So long, dearest!"

I entered our door alone and turned on the light of the little yellow lamp we used to love to sit under. And I mourned as though for some one dead.

My Freddie! My Freddie! The big stiff, thinking he could trot out with that silk-clad flapper and get away with it! Didn't his mother say I would soon learn everything?

Well, I would. I'd find out right here and now. There wouldn't be another minute of this terrible, prolonged agony that was killing me slow, like a blight of seven year locusts. I jammed on my lid and fared forth.

III.

Mrs. Friedman opened the door right away.

"Who is it?" she asked, cautious, peering out with the hall light behind her, framing her head with a halo.

"Fanny," I replied, pert. "Just little Fanny Friedman, your son's wife."

"Come in," she invited, her voice listless.

I entered and stood, though she pointed out a chair.

"I know I oughtn't to come," I apologized, though far from humble. "I know you don't want me here, but I gotta find out something I have a right to know."

"What is it?"

"It's about Fred," I choked, my bravado beginning to pale. "We—we ain't very happy."

"I know that," she said, her eyes sad. "I can see that in Freddie's face whenever he comes here."

"Oh, then, he ain't told you nothing," I deduced, relieved.

"No, but I knew just the same."

"How?" I inquired, suspicious.

"Something in here tells me," she said, holding her heart. "Some day you'll feel things like that, too."

We was silent. Then—

"Oh, Mrs. Friedman," I burst out, "we ain't the least bit happy, and we ought to be."

"Unhappy—my boy—" she murmured, sad.

"You're thinking I nag him!" I blazed. "You think I'm a she-tiger and a scold. Well, maybe I am, but I got a right to be when he goes out with—with that other jane."

"What jane?" asked Mrs. Friedman.

"Oh, you know her. You're real intimate with her. You think she's the kangaroo's camisole. I bet you wished Freddie had married *her!* Oh, of course she's wonderful. She got a father to hand her out automobiles and silver foxes—"

I broke down.

"Just what's the matter, Fanny?" asked my mother-in-law, using my first name. "What did this girl do to make you angry?"

"She entices Freddie over to see her—I think," I ended up, lame, then added, conclusive, "and he was riding with her tonight. She brung him home from the subway. I saw him getting out. A big blue car it was. Wasn't that what you said? And she had a silver fox around her neck. I'd like to choke her! But I won't. I'll just light out, Mrs. Friedman—clear out neat and snappy, and you and Molly Bern can have your Freddie back."

I caved in on the sofa and gave my grief full rein. And I hardly felt Mrs. Friedman's hand on my shoulder I was so racked with anger and despair.

"Fanny," she soothed, "Fanny, you mustn't take on so. You mustn't. It ain't good for you. You got to think of Freddie."

"Freddie!" I sobbed. "Always Freddie! You'd go out in the street and turn a somersault for Freddie!" I cried, raising my head, ferocious, to glare at her.

"Yes, I guess I would," she answered, gentle.

"Then do it!" I snapped.

She laid her hand again on my heaving shoulder.

"Fanny," she began, very calm, "what would you say if I told you *I* was in that big blue car with Freddie, wearing that silver fox?"

"You!" I hooted. "Where would you get a car and a fur piece like that?"

"It was a friend's car," she explained, "and the fur piece is—is mine."

"Then let me see it," I sneered. "I'd just love to see it!"

"It's over to the little furrier's down the street," she said, embarrassed. "I had to get the clasp fixed, and took it over there to-night. It'll be ready to-morrow night. You and Freddie come to supper."

"We will!" I accepted, vehement.

IV.

She was dressed up for the first time I'd ever seen her, all in Alice blue, that made her white hair seem whiter.

"Freddie boy!" she chortled with a hug. "How is mother's son? My, but you're tall! I never can get over how tall you are."

"Aw, shucks, mom," said Fred, embarrassed.

"Now, you two park on the sofa while I take a peep at the corned beef hash; and oh, I want to show Fanny something. You remember? My new fox piece that I had on yesterday? I promised to show it to Fanny."

I waited, sitting on the edge of the couch with rigid dignity while she traipsed to the other room.

"Here it is!" she triumphed, toting out a fur piece that gleamed like silver. "Ain't it handsome, now?"

"Gosh!" marveled my husband, laying down the sporting sheet. "What that?"

Mrs. Friedman appealed to me, amused.

"Ain't that just like a man?" she asked. "I had it on yesterday and he didn't even notice it till now."

My heart grew warm with renewed faith. It *was* hers!

"Gee, it's beautiful!" I breathed. "Just stroke it, Freddie. Rub it against your cheek."

Something in my voice conveyed to him the knowledge of my truce.

"Fanny!" he muttered, husky, laying down the paper and grabbing my hand. "Gee, but it's smooth and silky, just like your hair. Supper ready, mom? Sit here, honey, right close to me. Say, mom, wouldn't Fanny looked great in a thing like that? I'm gonna get her one—some day."

It was a gay supper. Mrs. Friedman even kissed me at the door, and me and my husband wended our happy way homeward.

And the next evening I prepared supper for my Freddie with true wifeliness. Over my new pink dress I slipped a frilly white apron, and in our blue flower bowl swam six pink roses.

My Freddie! Oh, how could I have doubted him?

"Did your mother come for you again to-night in her friend's car, dear?" I asked, dishing the steaming chicken pie. "I think it's real nice for you to have a little cooling ride after that awful subway."

"Huh?"

"I asked if your mother drove you over again to-night."

"Drove me over? Mom never drove me over."

"Oh," I intoned, suspicion gripping me again. "Then wasn't it your mother you drove home with day before yesterday?"

"No."

My heart pounded. I got up from the table.

"Where are you going, honey?" he asked.

"Into the other room. Serve yourself. I ain't hungry."

"But you ought to eat something, dear."

"I said I ain't hungry."

"Don't you feel good?"

"No."

He ate the rest of his supper alone, cleared off the dishes, and washed them. Then he ambled in, winding his watch, and yawned down the back of my neck.

"I'm kinda tired," he said, stretching. "Guess I'll go to bed. Coming?"

"No," I muttered, my tear-dimmed eyes buried in the evening paper. "I'm reading."

Half an hour dragged by.

"Fanny," come his sleepy voice from our boudoir, "ain't you coming, dear?"

Up and down the columns wandered my

feverish eyes—sporting news, shipping notes, ads.

"I'm still reading," I snapped.

She lied. Mrs. Friedman lied. He wasn't with *her*, but with that girl! Well, I'll cut loose from the whole bunch. Let the rest of 'em wrangle over their dear boy.

Up and down the blurry columns—Girl Shoots Sweetheart—Elks Convene Here Friday—Saleswoman Steals Fur—

It was only a little notice, but I read it again:

> Mrs. Ella Friedman, saleswoman for Roseman & Co., was brought before Judge Alders this morning on the charge of stealing a valuable silver fox, which was traced to her home at 235 East —— Street, late last night. Mrs. Friedman refused to explain the reason for the theft. As she has been a trusted employee of the firm for fifteen years, Mr. Louis Roseman, senior partner, withdrew charges, and she was released.

She did that! Freddie's mother did that for me! Jail she risked for me and my happiness. She was willing to buy my trust in Freddie no matter what the price. My trust in Freddie!

Of a sudden the dark doubts and sneaking suspicions that had rankled in my bosom crawled away and a warm, sweet feeling filled my heart.

How she loved Freddie and guarded his happiness. Would my love of him be less? Molly or no Molly, he was ours—hers and mine—only *I* didn't deserve him. But oh, how I would try!

"Fanny!" come his dear, sleepy voice. "Ain't you *ever* coming? I can't seem to sleep none."

"Yes, dear, I'm coming!" I answered soft.

It was a week later that Mrs. Bern herself happened in to tea. Mother Friedman was with us. She was with us a lot now.

"Why, Mrs. Friedman," bust out the newcomer, throwing back a beautiful silver fox piece that somehow seemed familiar. "Why, I ain't seen you in ages—not since my Molly sailed."

"Sailed?" echoed Fred's mother.

"Sure; didn't Freddie tell you? She sailed the first of September—for France and Italy and all those foreign places—"

"The first of September!" I echoed softly. "Why, that was our wedding day, dear!"

"Don't you think I don't know it!" said my husband, with a thrill in his voice.

"But, Freddie," I scolded, "why didn't you tell your mother and me that she was away—all this time? And was it Mrs. Bern that gave you the lift home. Oh, Freddie, why didn't you *tell* me?"

"You didn't ask me, dear."

Well, it was a lovely party, the nicest I'd ever had.

And say, take this tip from me, if you are a woman and in love. You may be blue-eyed or brown-eyed. It don't make no difference to the man who adores you.

But don't get *green-eyed!*

THE END

SOME IMPROVEMENT

THE gaunt old wolf was ever at his door.
Misfortune, too, with face severe and grim
Came oft, so oft that she was just a bore;
And Lady Luck turned up her nose at him.

Stark misery was with him day and night,
No ray of hope was ever his to see;
He cried out suddenly in his sad plight:
"Why should I have ill-luck monopoly?"

And then he slammed a mirror to the floor.
His wife exclaimed: "Our luck will now be bad!"
He said: "My dear, I pray thee, say no more—
That's *some* improvement on the kind we've had!"

Will H. Hendrickson.

West of Broadway

A STORY OF THE THEATER

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Gleaming Blade," "The Mad Movie," etc.

CHAPTER XXIV (*Continued*).

THE BIG NIGHT.

HE found Sally sitting in her dressing room almost entirely surrounded by Herbert Golding and several bouquets of flowers. She was smiling delightedly at the compliments, and she greeted Ben expectantly; more were in order.

"You were wonderful, Sally," he said. "I was so excited I forgot to send you flowers, but I see you have plenty."

"Yes," she simpered. "Mr. Golding was so thoughtful. He didn't forget."

"What do you think of the show, Mr. Golding?" Ben forced himself to say.

"Really, I was so carried away by Sally's acting that I didn't pay much attention. This girl will make Broadway sit up and take notice."

"Will you come to supper with me, Sally?" asked the author.

"Oh, Ben, I'm so sorry, but I've promised to go with Mr. Golding."

"Very well," he muttered, turning on his heel and stalking out. He heard a heartless giggle from Sally as he left. He walked blindly into a section of scenery, then a soft little hand caught his and squeezed it.

"Ben," said June, "I slipped around and saw the second or third act from the front. It wasn't bad, honest it wasn't."

"Thank you, June. Yours is the first word of kindness I've had to-night. But I'm afraid we have failed."

"Don't you believe it," she declared.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for March 27.

" You can't tell anything from a crowd like this. And there's lots of things you can do to it in two weeks."

CHAPTER XXV.

MUTINY.

BEN LUDLOW walked home with June. He said nothing, and she was sympathetically silent. When she whispered good night, she pressed his hand again and the boy ran away quickly to prevent her from seeing tears in his eyes.

The next three or four days were a continual nightmare. Beginning with a review in the morning paper which damned " West of Broadway " with faint praise, everything combined to indicate a complete failure. Humbolt Green departed for New York with the explanation that he had to see about getting a Broadway theater.

That Green did not completely abandon the production was not due to any expectation that he now had of profit, but because he was supposed to have plenty of money to supply the company for two weeks, and Golding or Ludlow could easily turn up his chicanery if they put an expert on his books.

He was much more afraid of Golding than he was of Ludlow. But he did not have the slightest intention of guaranteeing a Broadway theater; that would be a waste of money. He was assured that Golding would be satisfied to close the show at the end of two weeks on the road, while Ben would assume that their entire capital had been expended, and make him no trouble.

Golding proposed to remain with the attraction, the attraction being Sally, not the play. He had arranged his business affairs for a fortnight and expected her to creep into his arms when she found the play closing and herself out of a job.

Masterson disappeared at the end of the fourth day, and the performers began to take liberties with their lines, to gag them, as they say in the profession. Why not? They saw the handwriting on the wall.

The audiences in Greenboro proved to be as small and as unresponsive as those in Bellington. Jackson, who recovered from his despondency of the opening night, had to wire for funds to move the show from both places, wires which, considerably to his surprise, brought the necessary money.

The misbehavior of the cast, freed from the argus eye of Masterson, drove Ben to impotent fury and on Saturday night he was moved to call a meeting on the stage after the show. He had been urged by June to show his authority and provided with convincing argument from the same source.

He was a very young man, plunged into a highly technical business which he did not understand. But he was strong and decisive under ordinary conditions and he rose to the occasion now.

When the company had assembled on the stage, wondering what on earth the meek young author could wish to tell them, he strode out upon the boards with fire in his eye.

" You people pay strict attention to what I have to say," he began. " I am a half owner in this attraction as you know and I am also the author. My partners and I are paying you to act in this play; you have signed contracts and your salaries are guaranteed by the organization to which you belong.

" I don't care whether this is the best or worst play ever written, I am entitled to the most earnest, faithful work of which you are capable and I propose to have it.

" You have been having a lot of fun during the last two or three days because you think nobody is watching you. I know everything you are doing. If any one of you, from the leading woman down to the smallest bit, takes the slightest liberty with line or business I'll report you to your organization which will fine you good and plenty. This show isn't done. My partner is in New York trying to get a theater. I want you to get together and give a first-class performance from now on and just to make sure you do it we are going to have a rehearsal now, going through the whole play from the first line to the last. Get ready."

There was a slight murmur of dismay, but the regular troupers knew that he was entirely within his rights, that they had

brought this midnight rehearsal upon themselves. The only one to protest was Sally.

"Oh," she squealed, "I can't rehearse now. I have an engagement."

"No one can be excused," declared the dictator.

"I won't rehearse," she exclaimed, clenching both her little fists. "I won't. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"You are discharged from this company, and I'll see that your conduct is reported to the Equity."

"Ben Ludlow, how dare you!" she exclaimed.

Poor Ben stood his ground. For the first time he was angry with Sally; that she, the girl he loved, the girl whom he had permitted to head the company despite inexperience, should turn on him at such a vital moment!

"You will rehearse, Miss Jesson, or leave the company."

Sally looked wildly for Golding, but he was awaiting her at the hotel. June was by her side.

"Please, Sally, don't humiliate Ben," she pleaded. "He has to do this; it's his last chance."

"Get wise, kid, you can never get another job if you walk out at a time like this," whispered Guy Pilgrim.

"All right," acquiesced Sally, her chest rising and falling with her fury. "I'll rehearse, but don't you ever speak to me again, Ben Ludlow."

There was a burst of handclapping. Sally, who thought it was for her, looked about smiling, but it was for Ben Ludlow from the actors who understood their business. The rehearsal began and lasted until after two in the morning. It was a very satisfactory one, better than most performances.

Ben went home and slept soundly for nine hours, the first good night's rest he had had for a week.

Golding, after waiting an hour at the hotel, came to the theater and remained more or less patiently to the end. Then he escorted a thoroughly indignant Sally to the hotel. He smiled beneath his mustache at her attitude, but he was quite content because he considered it the end of Ben Ludlow as his rival.

He promised he would talk to Ben, exert his authority as a stockholder in the company to prevent such an outrage from occurring again, but he knew enough about the show business to understand that Ludlow had been justified in insisting upon the rehearsal, though, in his opinion, nothing could redeem the play.

The following Tuesday they played a one-night stand in Everton. Since the midnight rehearsal, the company had been working very well and performances had been pepped up perceptibly, save in the case of Sally, who was obviously working without interest. Ben had humiliated himself the next day, contrary to the advice of June, and Sally had kindly consented to forgive him, but it was a surface reconciliation.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MERRY STRIKERS.

EVERTON was a mill town and it happened that the mill workers had gone out on strike the day before. One would think that strikers who might be out of work for weeks and who should therefore guard their money most carefully, would be unlikely to patronize the theater; but showmen know that the reverse is true. The strikers were worked up to a pitch of excitement and they had to be amused. "Eat, Drink, and Be Merry, for To-morrow We Die" seemed to be their motto.

They stormed the box office of the Everton Theater where "West of Broadway" was booked, bought out the gallery and the balcony and overflowed into the orchestra in astonishing numbers. The entire week's receipts, up to and including that past Saturday night, had been under five hundred dollars, and there was seven hundred dollars in the house for the single performance in Everton.

The first intimation to the performers that there was something unusual going on came when a wild burst of laughter greeted the remark of the Jewish landlord that the Irish were rich. And the snappy retort of Mrs. Callahan brought the house down.

The Thespians threw back their heads

and champed the earth like fire horses. Applause was the breath of life to them. The two comedians plunged into their work and every gag, no matter how aged, brought a gratifying roar from the merry strikers. The first act went like a whirlwind and, when the curtain descended upon it, the applause was so furious that five curtain calls were necessary.

Between the acts, the performers talked excitedly. Even Sally caught fire. June was dancing about in delight. Guy Pilgrim performed a jig on the stage.

These people had convinced themselves that they would be thrown out of employment at the end of the week. They had rehearsed for four weeks and played two weeks for a fortnight's pay. They might tramp the streets for months before they got another engagement and that meant another month of unpaid services, followed by two weeks' work with excellent prospects of being at liberty again.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, they were given hope of long and profitable service; they might go into New York and make a hit and play for a year or two years.

They told themselves that this was the first audience to which they had played; all the others were small collections of deadheads. Those people out there who had laughed and clapped and cheered were the real public. Glory to goodness, they were working in a hit.

To the Everton strikers, the tawdry cabaret set meant nothing at all. They had never seen a gorgeous New York night club. They were the sort of people who could be carried away by acting without scenery, once they were interested in the plot. And they were looking at a play that they could understand. Boarding houses don't differ much, the length and breadth of the land. Omniverous readers of Sunday newspapers, they knew all about the wicked New York clubmen and how they spread their snares for poor but honest country girls.

So they ate the second act up, and they rejoiced with the triumph of the lowly hero in the last act, and loved the sweet blond girl who preferred honest marriage with a workingman to a gilded cage with a millionaire and no marriage certificate.

It so happened that Jackson was drunk again, and Ben Ludlow, in the absence of any other official, was compelled to count the house with the ticket sellers. Even in the stuffy box office he could hear the laughter and applause, and he was intoxicated with the box office statement.

June and Ben had a little celebration that night. They invaded the hotel dining room, ordered chicken a la king, and bubbled all over with glee. At the other side of the dining room, Ben saw Golding with Sally, and, conquering his dislike for the broker, he crossed the room and stopped beside their table. After all, the man had an interest in the company and he was entitled to share in the rejoicing.

Golding, however, was a wet blanket.

"It doesn't prove a thing, Ludlow," he said. "Your house was full of ignorant mill workers. Probably they hadn't been to a show for years and they were so full of excitement about their strike that anything would have tickled them. I have a wire from Humbolt Green that he hasn't been able to secure a New York house, so you'll close Saturday night just the same."

"But the show is a hit, I tell you, a hit."

"My dear boy, I have been compelled to see that show several times. It's a sure-fire flop. It would be very ill-advised to take it to New York, and I certainly shall use my influence against it. I don't want to be a laughing stock. And if Green and I insist upon closing, you have got to close. Fifty per cent is not control. Of course, you could buy my stock."

"How much do you want for it?" demanded Ben, hoarsely.

"I offered it to Green on the opening night for five hundred dollars. In view of your great success to-night, I must have at least a thousand."

"I'll take it," exclaimed Ludlow.

"Ben," said Sally, a little perturbed, "don't be foolish. You are making a mistake."

"Sally," mocked Golding, "I thought you were a friend of mine. You wouldn't prevent me from making a thousand dollars?"

"Oh, Herbert. Ben hasn't much money. It seems a shame."

Ben had his check book on the table and was writing rapidly.

"Here you are," he said. "Give me a statement that you are selling me your stock."

"I'll write it on the back of one of your blank checks. You are a fool, Ludlow. Don't you know that if you don't get a New York house by to-morrow, it will be too late to get in next week. They have to have three days to get out the advertising."

"That's my affair."

Golding said no more, but in a moment handed Ben a bill of sale.

"You might be able to lay off your troupe for a week or two," he added. "My advice is to disband Saturday night."

"I'll fight this thing to the end."

"You have my best wishes."

Ben returned to June with flushed face.

"What was all the excitement over there?" she demanded.

"I just bought out Golding for a thousand dollars."

"Oh, Ben, was that necessary? You can't have any money left."

"I had to do it. He told me he would get together with Green and force us to close Saturday night."

"But, if we have no bookings, we close anyway."

"I don't know what we'll do, but I control this company now and I know we've got a hit. I'm going to send a wire to Green that I control seventy-five per cent of the company and my orders are to get a house. We have plenty of money in the treasury."

"I wonder," mused June. "Green is a crook. I think he has been trimming you from the start."

"Some way, somehow, we're going to get this play into New York. I know that much."

"Atta boy. I think we're going to do just that."

They moved next morning, a four-hour jump to Broughton, and Ben hastened to the theater to find out what the sale had been. Alas, Everton with its strikers was far away. Up to four in the afternoon, only three fifty-cent tickets had been sold. The manager was apathetic, the prospects black.

Ben had no response to his wire to Humbolt Green, and he was a thousand dollars the poorer as a result of his enthusiasm of the night before. At the performance, the long rows of empty seats had their usual effect upon the actors. The performance slumped. Ben did not return to the auditorium after the first act. He sat in the manager's office listening to tales of horrible business done by other new shows until a grinning box office man showed him a statement of forty-one dollars for the night's receipts.

About ten thirty the door opened and a short, portly man with a derby hat and a round, red, Jewish face entered. He carried a cigar in one corner of his mouth, and he wore a cheerful expression out of place in that funereal gathering.

"Which of you is Ben Ludlow?" he demanded.

"I am."

"How much of this show does Humbolt Green own?" asked the stranger.

"Why—er—twenty-five per cent."

"How much does Golding own?"

"None of it. I bought him out last night."

"Going to close Saturday night?"

"Not if I can help it."

"You got to. You haven't got any more bookings."

"Say, who are you—and what business is it of yours?"

"Don't get sore, kid. I'm Sam Smith."

He looked surprised at Ben's blank expression.

"You don't know much about the show business," he stated. "I own the Rixton Theater in New York."

"I wish I did," said Ben bitterly.

"I caught your show last night, had to jump back to New York, and came on this afternoon. Want to go into my theater?"

Utter unbelief was reflected upon the face of the young producer. "You mean you'd let me in?" he stammered.

"Depends. I got a flop closing suddenly Saturday night. No booking. I wouldn't let Humbolt Green into my house on a bet, but if you promise to keep him away I might consider it."

"For God's sake," pleaded Ben, "let us in. We've got a hit here, Mr. Smith. I know it doesn't look like it to-night, but last night in Everton, with a big house, this play was a riot. Honest."

"I was there," said Smith. "Now, you can't tell anything about that Everton house. Your show is full of hokum, and all the characters are old-fashioned types. The critics will tear it to bits."

"Then, you won't let us in?"

"On the other hand, the public loves hokum in New York, like everywhere else. There are just as many hicks in the big town as in Everton. What those strikers liked might hit the New York audiences the same way. You may have a terrible flop and you may have a whale of a hit. What sold me was that Jew and Irish stuff. Look at 'Abie's Irish Rose.' Got any money left?"

"Yes, we have plenty of money. Mr. Green is prepared to guarantee a house."

"You're goofy. If Green has your money, you haven't got any."

"Oh, yes; we had twenty thousand cash capital. I put up ten thousand and Green put up ten thousand."

"You're crazy. That tin horn hasn't got a nickel, and he's probably swiped half of your ten thousand. I bet you are broke."

"I have two or three thousand in the bank myself."

"Willing to throw that in?"

"You bet your life."

"Shake, kid," said Mr. Smith. "You are a showman. Now you'll need your coin for advertising to get over the first week. I'll let you in on a fifty-fifty basis up to ten thousand, forty for me after that. You pay all the advertising. If you like, I'll have my house press agent place your ads. I'll take any publicity you have back to New York with me to-night. You open in the Rixton Monday night. Give me your bookings, and I'll mail you down the contracts. You stick with the show. Masterson ran out on you, didn't he?'

"Yes, sir."

"The dirty dog!"

"How can I ever thank you, Mr. Smith?"

"By making me a lot of money. Look here, run down with me to-night on the train. I'll show you how to fix Green."

Ben glanced at his watch. It was eleven fifteen.

"Get Jackson," he said to the box office boy, who ran out of the office. "I'll go with you, Mr. Smith."

Jackson, who was just leaving the theater, came in on the run. He recognized Sam Smith, and exhibited his astonishment.

"Mr. Smith has booked us into the Rixton Monday night, Jackson," Ben informed him. "If you can stay sober the rest of the week, you may have a good job. Take the troupe on to Milton, post a notice about our New York opening, and I'll rejoin you in Milton to-morrow night."

"Can you beat this?" demanded Jackson of the house manager, as Ludlow and Smith went through the door.

"Pooh, he's stuck with a dark house and is willing to grab anything," scoffed the latter. "New York will laugh this show into the storehouse in a week."

Ben ran all the way to his hotel, called June's room, found that she had just got in. She screamed with delight at the news.

"Tell Sally," requested Ben. "I haven't got a minute, because I'm taking the midnight with Mr. Smith, but I'll be back in time for the performance in Milton."

"I'd like to see Golding's face when he hears about it," she gloated.

Both men turned into their berths when they reached the train, and breakfasted together in the Astor in the morning. Smith was dumb as regards to his method of handling Green.

In reply to questions he simply chuckled and said:

"You leave it to me. It will be so easy."

CHAPTER XXVII.

HANDLING HUMBOLT GREEN.

BEN accompanied Smith to the Rixton Theater, which he had never seen, and rejoiced to find it was a beautiful new house which seated nine hundred people.

"I know where there is a first-class restaurant set," Smith told him. "Belonged to a show that flopped last season. I can borrow it for you, and if the show goes over you can buy it for five hundred dollars. Now let me read my mail."

At ten thirty they entered the office of Humbolt Green, who had arrived but a few moments before. He regarded Ludlow with disfavor and Smith with astonishment.

"What's the idea of deserting the show?" he demanded.

"You know me, Green," proclaimed Sam Smith.

"Sure I know you. What do you want?"

"Come into your private office. What I have to say you may not want overheard."

"You haven't anything to say to me, but come in if you want to."

"Here's the idea," said Smith. "My house is dark next week. I might let 'West of Broadway' come in."

"Fine! Great!" exclaimed Humbolt Green. "Just the thing!"

"Only I couldn't let any show that you are connected with come within a mile of my theater. I'm afraid of disease."

"Hey, you cut that stuff," Green protested, casting a frightened glance at Ben Ludlow.

"If I don't let it in, it closes for good Saturday night."

"Oh, I don't know."

"It does," grinned Smith. "So you make nothing out of it."

"If it closes, of course we are through."

"So that settles you. But Ludlow, here, bought out Golding and owns seventy-five per cent of the stock of the company."

"What if he does?"

"As president and majority stockholder he grabs the books and finds out what became of the twenty thousand dollars put up by both you, of which only ten thousand dollars have been spent."

"My books are open."

"And if he finds you didn't put up ten thousand, or if you have padded any bills, or paid any back bills out of this money, you go to jail."

"What's your proposition?" asked Green sullenly.

"You turn over to me your quarter interest in the company that you paid nothing for, and we accept your statement of accounts. Or you refuse to do it, and see what happens. Of course, if everything is all right, you don't have to accept."

"You can have the stock," said Green. "The damn show is no good."

"How would you know?" grinned the theater owner. "Make out the transfer now."

The interview astonished Ben. Having no notion in the world that Green had been playing ducks and drakes with the company funds, and being firmly convinced that he had invested ten thousand dollars in the enterprise, he was thunderstruck when the producer collapsed and accepted the proposition of the astute Sam Smith without a struggle.

And the impudence of Smith in taking for himself, for nothing, a quarter interest in what might be a very profitable play was equally astounding.

When they left the office, the securities in the inside breast pocket of Sam Smith, the latter volunteered to explain.

"It's like this," he said. "Usually I never take less than half a show, because there are so many crooks in the business. But you don't know enough to be dishonest, so I'm not taking any chance. You might say I have no right to this stock, but it's better for me to have it than him, and if it wasn't for me being wise to his tricks that crook would steal the whole show on you. Besides, I never do anything for anybody for nothing."

"I'm very glad you have the stock, Mr. Smith. I must say that Humbolt Green's duplicity astonished me."

"You ain't wise, young fellow. It's good for you to have me in, because now I pay a quarter of the company expenses. You come to my office and give me a check for seven hundred and fifty dollars. It costs a thousand for advertising to start the show off. Then you take a train back as quick as you can, because you never know what happens to a show on the road.

"There are two big openings Monday night, and that's lucky for us, because the

highbrow critics will all go to the other shows and we'll get the second and third string men. Only the head critics are allowed to pan shows.

" With that bundle of hokum, it would be better if no critics came at all, but you can't keep them out, and the kind of people we will go after don't read newspaper reviews anyway. Say, I ain't so strong for your leading woman. She's pretty, but she can't act. It's lucky the part ain't so much."

Ben leaned back in his Pullman chair, lazily watching the scenery unroll outside the window, while he considered the strange assortment of circumstances which had resulted in landing him on top of the heap. That he had arrived he was positive. Had not his own judgment been ratified by the keen, alert, and long experienced Sam Smith? " West of Broadway " would open Monday and would run a year; nothing could stop it.

And how queerly this had come about! Humbolt Green had met a pretty girl and learned from her that a man friend who was writing a play had a bank account. Poor Sally had probably divulged the information most casually, and the hungry impresario had grasped the news like a drowning man reaching for a straw.

Green, being aware of the bank balance, had insisted upon producing the play; he never had had the rich backer of whom he spoke; he had intended all the time to make Ben finance it. Thus Mr. Green got Ben to put up all the money and secured half of the play for nothing.

As Ben knew now, Green had no faith in the play and expected to make his profit upon the difference between producing it well and badly. He had engaged a director justly described as " Last Hope," and much of the money had gone to pay his personal expenses.

And why had Golding bought into what seemed like a bad play horribly produced? The answer was obvious. He had seen Sally, and wanted the privilege of being near her. He had no interest at all in the play, in fact was as willing as Green to have it closed.

Ben, as innocent as any baby lamb, had been in business with these two sharpers; it was a wonder that they hadn't eaten him, clothes and all.

But there was another side of the ledger, the credit side. Ben really owed a debt of gratitude to Humbolt Green. Without the man's skillful salesmanship he would not have dreamed of investing his inheritance in a play of his own, his first. Green's knowledge of the tricks of the trade had resulted in their producing a play and sending it upon the road, probably for half the cost of an ordinary production. The way Green had schemed and wiggled to put the show out on a shoe string, it seemed rather a pity that he was to be beaten out of his share of the profits, which were to go to Sam Smith, who had never heard of the production a week before, whose only contribution was the open door of his theater, for which he would be amply paid through the ordinary playing arrangement.

As Smith had explained, Green had probably made two or three thousand dollars' profit upon the ten thousand Ben had invested, so no use in wasting sorrow on him. As a sharper he had been too sharp.

It was far better to have Smith as a partner in the play, for it bound him to the piece, made him exert himself to put it over. The owner of the theater could do a lot to nurse a play along until it burst into full success, Ben had heard; Sam Smith had every reason to plug for " West of Broadway."

He began to consider the fruits of success. Smith had told him that his theater could play to fifteen thousand dollars a week, of which eight thousand would come to the play. The weekly cost of operating " West of Broadway " would not exceed three thousand dollars, leaving a profit of five thousand per week, three-quarters of which belonged to Ben Ludlow.

That was not all. He had his author's contract, which would bring him in more than a thousand dollars per week. Five thousand dollars per week for a year was two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Of course, a play which made a terrific hit like " West of Broadway " would send out several companies, perhaps eight or ten —say ten. At a personal profit of five

thousand dollars per week for ten companies, that would give him fifty thousand dollars a week, or two million and a half dollars for a single year.

Then there were the motion picture rights and the book rights, probably worth two or three hundred thousand more. And of course he would write more plays. Naturally he would follow up his first success. Why, he would be tremendously rich!

Maybe he would have more money than this fellow Golding. If he came to Sally with vast riches she would turn from Golding to him, without any doubt. Of course Golding only interested her because he had so much money.

He hated to think of Sally as being like that, but she would get over it as she grew older—it was just because she was such a kid. Rather than let Golding have her, he would bid for her against him, purchase her like a beautiful sultana, if that was the sort of thing that Sally wanted.

And as he roamed around in the upper regions of bliss, the array of big figures which represented his potential profits gradually confused him, and, mingling with the rattle of the train, the rumble of the dollars caused him to fall fast asleep. When he awoke, the porter was shaking him to force him to descend, because the train was pulling into the Milton station.

Jackson met him upon the station platform wearing an expression of concern.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A RUDE AWAKENING.

"I'M glad to see you, boss," was Jackson's salutation. "Say, there isn't much of any sale in sight to-night, and I wired to Green to send along about three hundred berries. I got a return wire about an hour ago saying he was through with the show and I was to get the money from you."

Here was a phase of the situation that had not suggested itself to Ben. Until to-day Green had wired the funds necessary to move the troupe from place to place and pay the local stage hands and baggagemen. From now on the responsibility was up to himself. In his pocket reposed less than fifty dollars.

"How much do you think we'll take in to-night?" he temporized.

"Maybe a hundred, maybe two hundred, maybe fifty—how do I know? You got to figure on coughing up to-night and to-morrow night in Benton. On Saturday at Landhurst, where we play a matinée and night, we might get four or five hundred dollars."

"What do you estimate our expenses?"

"Well, it's at least a couple of hundred to get out of here; more than that to get from Benton to Landhurst. Maybe we'll get enough in Landhurst to take us back to Broadway, but I wouldn't bet on it."

"All right; I can manage it. How are things?"

"O. K., as far as I know. Say, is it straight we open in New York Monday?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, I suppose I've been too close to this show to see it fairly, and Smith isn't a fool, but I'm hanged if I know how we are going to get away with New York. You didn't have to put up a guarantee for the theater?"

"We got a break," Ben explained. He was beginning to pick up showman parlance. "His house went dark on him."

"Of course the hams are all swelled up over it. Let's go up to the theater."

At the theater they found the customary local manager filling a dark private office with bad tobacco smoke. He had heard the news contained in Jackson's telegram; in "dog towns" they have a way of checking up on visiting managers, and he was in a pugnacious mood.

"Who's going to pay my stage hands?" he demanded. "We won't have any house and I want to see the color of your money, Mr. Ludlow."

"I can give you a check for the difference, whatever it may be."

"Ha, ha, spring a new one. Catch me taking checks from a shoe-string producer."

"But if you won't cash my check, who will?"

"Ask Beatrice Fairfax! If you don't give me a guarantee in cash of a hundred

and fifty dollars before eight o'clock, you won't give a performance here."

He turned his back on them, walked into the box office and shut the door? Jackson approached Ben and asked in a whisper:

"Have you got any money in the bank?"

"Do you suppose I'd write a check if I didn't have money to cover it?"

"Sure. Why not. These local managers have been stung by bad checks from good people. You are all right with Sam Smith?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Phone him to wire you five hundred dollars against your check that you are sending him special delivery. Maybe he'll take a chance."

"Of course, he will. Put in a call for New York."

Jackson called New York while Ben smoked half a dozen cigarettes, lighting one from the butt of another. If Smith failed him, or if he could not be reached, he did not know how he could escape from this unexpected difficulty.

And it meant lowering his bank balance to a figure which appalled him. He had exactly thirty-two hundred dollars remaining to his credit before he had bought out Golding. At present he possessed fourteen hundred and fifty. Five hundred more for expenses brought it down to nine hundred and fifty. Well, that would probably be enough, but if the play failed to catch New York he would be left without a dollar.

Worse was to come. Smith was on the telephone.

"Hello, Ludlow. I'll wire you five hundred and take your check in the morning, but you've got to make it out for a thousand. They got on to the fact we wanted that cabaret set and held me up. I won't let you in with that set Green gave you. And first thing Monday morning you've got to take out the five or six women in that cabaret scene to some good shop and buy them gowns. Your costumes are terrible, all except the leading woman's."

"All right," said Ben, feebly. "Please wire the money right away."

He was so weak when he hung up that he had to sit down or fall. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead, he grew deadly sick, a swarm of black specks floated before his eyes, then he was buried in a mist. When he came back to life he found Jackson bending over him, forcing the neck of a whisky flask between his teeth.

"You'll be all right," said the company manager. "Just a let down from the strain. It's a wonder everybody in the show business don't go crazy."

"Did I faint?"

"You were out cold for a minute or two. You're pretty young to be carrying a load like this."

"I'll carry it," Ben declared, grimly.

"I'm betting on you, kid."

Ben ate no dinner that night, nor did he leave the box office. He had no notion how much the costumes demanded by Sam Smith would cost, but undoubtedly they would total more than his dwindling bank balance. Like a drowning man grasping at a straw, he watched the box office, hoping foolishly, that a sudden demand for "West of Broadway" would enable him to escape paying Milton for the privilege of giving a performance there.

The box office man was reading "The Green Hat" and had few interruptions. Those who came up usually pushed a piece of white paper through the grill and walked off with seat checks torn from tickets.

When the United States Congress removed the tax on passes which had amounted to ten per cent of the face value of the tickets given in exchange for the pass, a great many theater owners continued to collect the ten per cent and either put it in their pockets or turned it over to house charities. But in the "dog towns" they did not attempt to collect a fee on passes. Not one of ten would have paid even ten per cent of the face value of the tickets which had been pressed upon them by the earnest press agents.

In two hours, from five thirty to seven thirty, only ten dollars in cash was pushed across the shelf of the box office. And then came a telegraph messenger with the order from Sam Smith for the cash with which to get out of town. Ben had to go to the telegraph office to identify himself. On the way he met June Jesson looking wistfully into a milliner's window.

His heart gave a glad bound when he

saw the sweet, pert, pretty little thing whose friendship had come to be so important during the past month.

"Oh, Ben. Is everything all right?" she asked, when he touched her on the shoulder.

He smiled affirmatively. "We're going in," he told her.

"It's perfectly marvelous. Say, Ben, do you suppose, if the show is a big hit and you're making lots of money, you could tilt my salary a bit? I'm a sight and I haven't a cent to buy clothes with. After I've given Sally her twenty bones, there isn't much left for gay togs."

"Do you mean to say you are giving Sally money now?" he asked, in surprise. "Why, she's getting a hundred."

"She's only touched one week, you know, and it costs money to stop in the swell hotels."

"But that is ridiculous."

"She has to have a good address if she is the leading lady."

"I'll speak to Sally about this," he said. Really, the child's thoughtlessness was beyond belief. "Where is she staying?"

"She's going to the Milton Belmont, but I called up an hour ago and she hadn't got in."

"But the company arrived here at two this afternoon."

"She didn't come with the company. She came over in Golding's Rolls-Royce from Broughton. They left this morning before I got up."

"That's the limit," Ben fumed. It was a gross breach of discipline for Sally to leave the company and the thought of her motoring alone with Golding for many hours awakened his jealousy. "I thought Golding would leave when I bought his interest in the show. I've got a good mind to tell him I won't have him hanging around. Why didn't you put a stop to it, June?"

"A cow tried to stop a locomotive once and look what happened to her," she said, with a pained smile. "Sally treats me like the dirt under her feet, lately. She had the gall to remind me that she was the leading woman and I was only a bit, the day before yesterday."

"I don't know what's come over Sally," he moaned.

"I do. She's got a swelled head, and it's your fault for making an actress out of her. I warned you how it would be."

"That doesn't help now. Walk with me to the telegraph office."

On the way he explained the situation to her and June put her finger on a difficulty which had not occurred to him.

"How are you going to meet the pay roll, Saturday?" she demanded.

"Why, I don't know," he stammered. The realization that some seventeen hundred and fifty dollars had to be paid at the matinée performance came upon him with the crushing force of a pile driver.

"Humbolt Green met it last week, but he's out and if there is any money left in the treasury, he grabbed it to pay for what you and Smith did to him."

"Of course. We're done. We can't survive this blow."

"On the other hand, he had to deposit cash or a bond for the two weeks with the Equity or we wouldn't be here. Now, maybe the Equity will pay off out of that money, or your friend Smith will come through when he knows that the Equity will pay him back. Don't get despondent."

"June, I don't know what I would do without you," he said, brokenly. "You wrote the part of the play that sold it to Sam Smith, the Jewish-Irish scenes, you were on to Green from the first, you pulled me out of a dozen holes since we started, you certainly have been a friend."

"Aw, I ain't done nothin'," retorted June, her emotion causing her to lapse into her old fashion of speaking. "You've been the best pal a girl ever had. I wish to God you'd take Sally by the throat and make her marry you."

"Sally hasn't been the same girl since we took to the road."

"Oh, she'll come out of it. She isn't a bad kid, and you can't be as pretty as she is and have any sense."

"You are pretty and you have more sense than a man."

"I'm just a cheap little chorus girl and I'll never be anything else. Go get your money; here's the telegraph office."

Ben identified himself without difficulty.

"I have a couple of telegrams that have just come in," said the clerk. "One for you and one for Miss June Jesson of 'West of Broadway' company. Say, have you got a good show?"

"It's a corker," said Ben.

"Well, I didn't know if it was worth while or not. I got a pass, but, honest, it's getting so a fellow will have a better time home with the radio than sitting looking at what they call shows in this town."

"I'm sure you'll like this one. This young lady is Miss Jesson."

June took her telegram, opened it, lost every vestige of color and put her hand on her heart. She cast a lightning glance at Ben and saw that he was reading a telegram from Smith which accompanied the draft.

"Ben," she said. "Don't read the other telegram. I want to talk to you first."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SKY FALLS.

"WHAT'S the matter, June?" he asked, solicitously. "You look as though you were going to faint. No bad news, I hope."

"Come outside," she said. "Quick. I got to tell you something."

He led her out of the office.

"What is it? Something about Sally? There's been an automobile accident?"

"No, she's not hurt. Come across to the park and let's sit on a bench."

They crossed the street, Ben growing more and more alarmed at her curious manner. June dropped with a sigh on the seat and he sat quickly beside her.

"For heaven's sake, tell me what is the trouble," he pleaded.

"Ben, how much do you love Sally? Are you crazy about her still?"

"Why—er—of course."

"But supposing she didn't love you and wouldn't marry you. Would it kill you?"

"I don't suppose you know what you are talking about. But if Sally didn't love me, probably I would survive. It doesn't look as though she does, the way she's acting."

"She don't love you, Ben," said June, who took his hand as she spoke. "Ben, Sally's married."

"Good God. Is that what was in the telegram?"

"Yes."

"I suppose she married Golding," he said, in a low pained voice.

"Yes. They went to New York from Broughton and were married at noon to-day in the Little Church Around the Corner."

Ben slumped forward and hid his face in his hands. Tears were streaming down the girl's cheeks.

"I can make a guess how you feel," she said. "I think it would kill me if I loved a man and he married another girl. I know there isn't a thing I can say, Ben. You don't want to be bothered with me when you feel like that."

He took his hands from his face and looked at her courageously.

"I'm sorry I made a fool of myself, June," he said, with a pathetic attempt to smile. "I sort of idolized that girl. She was my inspiration for the play. I thought she was the most exquisite creature in the world and she had the most beautiful soul.

"For a long time I couldn't see a fault in her and when they forced themselves on me I made excuses for her. She almost broke my heart the night she refused to rehearse, the only one in the company to defy me. I think that was a worse blow than this because it was the first time I realized that she was selfish and mean.

"I was afraid of something like this ever since, because Golding was dazzling her with his money. When you told me a little while ago that she was accepting more than half your salary, although her own was three times as big, I was ashamed of her. I don't suppose a fellow can really love a girl when he thinks she is selfish and mercenary and mean, but, just the same, this is a terrible blow. I was hoping she'd outgrow those qualities when she got older. What does she say?"

"Nothing except what I told you, but you've got an unopened telegram in your pocket. Probably it's from her."

He stuck his hand in his pocket, drew

out the telegram and handed it to the girl. "You read it," he said. "I couldn't."

June tore it open with an ominous rattle of paper. She read in a low tone:

"BEN LUDLOW,

"'West of Broadway' Company, Milton:

"Herbert and I were married to-day at the Little Church Around the Corner. Sorry to be compelled to leave the company, but as you are closing Saturday a couple of days won't do you any harm. I shall always think kindly of you.

"SALLY GOLDING."

"That's something," he said bitterly.

"Ben," exclaimed June, shrilly. "The play!"

"What do I care about the play?"

"But Sally's gone. You have no leading woman."

"I hadn't thought of that," he said bitterly. "She has deserted me at the most vital moment. She not only has broken my heart, but she has ruined me. We have no understudy, we can't get anybody in time. We can't open in New York. It's the end of everything."

June stood up in her excitement.

"Ben Ludlow," she declared. "I'm ashamed of you. Don't give her the satisfaction of ruining you. She is malicious enough to be glad of it. You are not licked."

"We can't give a performance to-night. This finishes us."

"You can give a performance if you want to. You must."

"And who will play *Evelyn?*"

"I will."

"But you can't, June. You don't know the part."

"Of course I know it. How do you suppose that bonehead sister of mine ever learned it? I beat it into her. I know every line, every gesture, every piece of business. I can go on without a rehearsal if you'll take a chance on me."

Ben caught her excitement, he grasped her hands. "You bet your life I'll take a chance on you," he declared. "You may be our salvation. But, June, you've never appeared in a play, you've just been a show girl. Do you really think you can do it?"

"If Sally, who never set foot on a stage in her life, could do it, why can't I? I've twice her brains and I've been in front of audiences for four years. Give me this chance, Ben. To-night you can go to New York. It's only Thursday. Get a good leading woman. She can get up in the part, play it Saturday afternoon and night and appear on Monday in New York."

"Who could learn a big rôle in twenty-four hours?"

"Any experienced actress. It's been done often."

"If you can do this, June, I'll be grateful to the last day of my life."

"Rot! I owe it to you for ever introducing you to Sally. Come on to the theater."

"What will we do with your part?"

"Cut it out. It's nothing but a bit of character and not necessary to the action. You can have somebody down to do it for the Saturday performances."

They hastened to the opera house, went behind and, while June rushed into Sally's dressing room, Ben went about informing the members of the company of the new arrangement. Consternation greeted him. The troupe had been very happy since receiving the news of their coming descent upon Broadway; this threw them back into the slough of despond. However, there was a chance for them all if June could play the part. They would help her in every way possible.

June met him at the door of her dressing room with a dismayed and chagrined face.

"I hate to tell this on my own sister, but the little devil carried off her costumes with her," she said. "Did you ever hear the like?"

"They were her property," he said sadly. "Golding supplied them, not Humbolt Green. Now, I don't know what to do."

"Listen, Ben, what was *Evelyn* doing in that cabaret in a Worth gown? That was always wrong. Won't it be more effective if she comes in with a little street dress because it's all she owns?"

"I suppose it would," he agreed.

"That's what's going to happen because we can't do anything else. Now you get out front and tell me how rotten I am."

There was the usual depressingly small audience awaiting the curtain. Ben found a seat on the aisle three or four rows back. The four piece orchestra murdered the "Tannhauser Overture," and then the play began. He observed that the company was very nervous, no doubt expecting a débacle at any moment, but they managed to get through until the entrance of June.

Something had happened to June since he left her. In her character bit she had never attracted attention, but when she made her entrance as *Evelyn* she was a different person.

Sally had been flamboyantly lovely, as out of place in that dingy room as an orchid in a stable. She had passed with audiences because of her beauty, she had stunned them, but she had never really won them. June was appealing; a pathetic, winsome little creature. Ordinarily she was saucy; that phase of her had vanished. Her voice was low and pleasant, her gestures natural and appropriate. In a few minutes Ben realized that she was playing better than Sally had ever played, and the other actors understood it and took heart. When the curtain descended the applause from the handful out front was spontaneous.

One of the troubles with Ben's play was that it had never seemed to ring true; it was artificial and theatrical. June's realism corrected that, for it had been Sally who was responsible for it all. She had been a Follies girl pretending to be meek and lowly, but so infatuated were Ben Ludlow and Herbert Golding that they had not sensed it.

In the cabaret scene June was a wren among swans, and a wave of pity for the sweet dumb thing in the snare of a hawk like Guy Pilgrim went out from the people beyond the footlights. Ben felt a lump in his throat for the first time since he had written the scene. At no performance had the pathos of it affected him at all.

By the time the play was over the small audience was wildly enthusiastic. For the first time "West of Broadway" had scored a deserved success. As Ben was rushing around to the stage entrance he met Jackson and the house manager, also headed for the stage door.

"That kid was marvelous," declared the old trouper. "She drew a few weeps out of me and I haven't had a drink."

"If this show was here another day, it would pack the house!" exclaimed the theater manager.

June was receiving the congratulations of the troupe when the trio came upon the stage. She waved her hand at Ben.

"Do you think I can hold the fort till you get a leading woman?" she laughed.

"I've got a leading woman," he said, almost hysterically. "You open in New York."

"If she don't, I quit the show and God knows I need the money," declared Guy Pilgrim.

"I never played with a better actress," announced the leading man.

The other Thespians joined in the chorus heartily. June was their salvation and it was no time for petty jealousy. In his frenzy of gratitude Ben took her two little hands in his, bent over and kissed them, which caused June to burst into tears, snatch them away and run to her dressing room, slamming the door behind her.

The entire company escorted her to the hotel and held a jubilation in the grill-room until the management turned out the lights on them.

It did not seem to Ben that he had been asleep an hour when a loud pounding on his door caused him to open his eyes and sit up in bed. It was daylight, evidently about nine o'clock, but he was very sleepy.

"Who's there?" he demanded drowsily.

"Telegram for you, sir."

He slipped out of bed, opened the door and received the yellow envelope. Its contents were quite astonishing.

BEN LUDLOW,
Milton, New York:

Find you open in New York Monday. Did not realize was ruining your prospects. Thought you had to close Saturday. Have won Herbert's consent to break honeymoon, will return Saturday for matinée and will open for you in New York. Congratulations and best wishes from my husband.

SALLY GOLDING.

"Like hell you will," said Ben grimly. "This was all I needed to get the measure of the nasty little cat."

He snatched pen and paper and indited the following reply:

> Could not think of interrupting your honeymoon. Hope you will be very happy. Have secured wonderful leading woman. Shall send you seats for the opening. Accept my congratulations on your marriage. Regards to your husband. BEN LUDLOW.

"June's little finger is worth her whole mercenary body," he muttered as he pressed a button for the bellboy. "I suppose June will be unselfish enough to want me to let her come back, so I'll get this away and avoid argument."

He had judged correctly as regards June. She read Sally's telegram and urged that he summon her.

"I haven't any sympathy for Sally," she explained. "She probably saw the advertisements in the New York papers and realized that she had lost her chance to appear in New York as a leading woman. But don't let sentiment interfere with business. She is so beautiful that she'll make a terrific hit and save your play."

"She is so beautiful that she ruined the play," he told her. "I never realized until I saw you last night that Sally was completely wrong in the part. While she was in it I had a bad play. With you, I have a good one. So it would be utter folly to gratify her vanity, don't you see it?"

"You really intend to let me open? I thought you were just overcome with gratitude last night, but after a good sleep you'd think that you were making a mistake."

"You were made for the part, June. You have got to play it."

"From a Summer Garden living picture to a leading woman in the legitimate; that's some jump in a couple of months," she said with her impish grin. "I suppose the papers will dig up my model pictures."

He shuddered and she saw that he shuddered.

"We can't get away from my history, Bennie," she continued with a wistful smile. "But maybe it will be good publicity for the show."

"Damn such publicity!" he said fiercely.

"Ben, that's a part of my life I hate to think of. You don't know how I was up against it when I took the job. Nothing seemed to matter. I had no friends, no hope, and I just had to eat. I suppose I ought to have turned on the gas."

"I don't care anything about your past," he exclaimed. "You are going to have a wonderful future, June. No matter what happens to the play, they are going to remember your performance."

"All I care about is the play."

"You get Sally's hundred dollars to-morrow. She has forfeited it by deserting and she doesn't need it. And next week, if you put the show over I'll pay you the three hundred per week that I had promised her."

"Oh, Ben, you're wonderful!" she sighed. She said it just as Sally had been wont to use the same expression. He remembered they were sisters after all. But how different sisters can be. He should have gone to New York to see Sam Smith about the pay roll, but he could not tear himself away from the company. He was mad to see June play *Evelyn* again. For the first time since the first rehearsal he loved his play, was proud of it. So he chanced calling Sam Smith on the telephone.

"Write out authority for me to act for your stock," said Smith. "Shoot Jackson, or somebody, down here right away with it. I'll get your pay roll without any trouble."

So Ben was able to travel with the show to Landhurst, where he saw June give a better performance than she had given in Milton. On Sunday morning he journeyed back to New York with a very happy aggregation of actors, and on Sunday night a special performance was given in the theater in which they were to open next night with Sam Smith as the sole auditor.

"How did you arrange about the pay roll?" asked Ben as he joined the manager for a moment in the auditorium.

Smith indulged in a chuckle. "I swooped down on Green with your power of attorney, forced his resignation as treasurer and elected myself in his place. Then I notified the Equity of the change. Of course, they will return the bond to me instead of him since it was filed in the name of the corporation.

"But half of it is his money, isn't it?"

"That's a question. We won't bother

about it until we see how your show goes over."

At the end of the first act, Ben called on him again.

"Say," said Smith. "This new girl is all right. I don't know but you've got a show here after all. That blond clothes-horse was a peach, but she couldn't act. This youngster is putting it over. Where did you get her?"

"She was playing a bit in the first act."

"I remember. But she don't seem like the same girl."

"She isn't," said Ben, with a beaming smile.

When the final curtain descended, Ben saw him again. He had spent the last two acts in the wings watching June like one fascinated.

"My boy, you've got a better chance than I thought you had when I booked you," said the shrewd old manager. "It ain't a wonderful show, but it's got heart interest and comedy. I wish I owned half of it. If you're broke, maybe you'd like to sell some more."

"I hold on to my three quarters," grinned Ben.

"Well, I would in your place. Good night. Don't forget about the costumes in the morning."

CHAPTER XXX.

TEN CENTS TO HIS NAME.

THOSE costumes!

Ben had come back from the road with two hundred dollars. He drew his four hundred and fifty from the bank and, when he had paid for five gowns which had satisfied Smith, he had exactly two dollars in the world. He took June to lunch in a cheap restaurant and fifty cents remained, so he went without dinner. As a matter of fact, he was so excited that he could not have eaten if he had been flush.

Sam Smith knew how to draw a first night audience. Despite the counter attractions, the house was full, with a fair sprinkling of society folk in gala attire.

He stood in the lobby, watching the audience assemble while Sam Smith pointed out to him various celebrities. He saw the critics, several of them extremely youthful, few well dressed, none of the first string men among them.

They were desk men or reporters, pressed into service by the dramatic editors because of the numerous openings.

"If those fellows only knew that everything I have in the world was in this production, that I have only fifty cents between me and starvation, maybe they wouldn't be very harsh," he told himself. He resisted a mad impulse to stop one or two of them and tell them the truth, but he knew it would not do.

"Better go back and talk to the actors. Just tell them you know they'll make good," suggested Smith. "They'll like it and you'll go crazy if you hang around here."

Accepting the suggestion, he went around to the stage entrance and knocked at June's door. She was ready and welcomed him calmly.

"Aren't you nervous?" he asked her.

"Not a particle. You forget that I've appeared before New York audiences before."

"Oh, that!"

"Let me tell you it was a lot worse than this. I know my lines, I've got clothes on, and I've got to make good for you."

"June, I suppose you are the finest girl in the world."

"Go talk to the other actors and come around after the show to take me to supper. Are you going to give a supper to the company?"

"I can't. I've only got fifty cents."

"Well, I'll pay for our supper. I've got most of my salary."

He pressed her hand, and she pushed him out of the dressing room. He said something to other members of the company, what, he did not know, then rushed back to the lobby. A moment later the curtain rose.

A strange phenomenon then occurred. His legs wouldn't take him into the auditorium. He tried, but they seemed paralyzed. They would move in the other direction and he found himself upon the street. Then he began to walk. He walked

a mile and found himself ravenously hungry. He entered a cafeteria and spent forty cents for coffee and sandwiches. He returned to the theater in three-quarters of an hour to see a score of men and one or two women smoking cigarettes upon the sidewalk. It was intermission. Noticing one man standing alone and apart he sidled up to him and asked hoarsely:

" How's the show."

" Oh," said the man, carelessly, " just a bunch of hokum."

Ben's legs reassumed control and carried him rapidly away from the place of entertainment. He was very despondent, very sorry for himself. He thought of the river fondly. It was fairly cold and he shivered. If it were only summer the water would be warmer. He passed through many dark streets and eventually found himself again outside the theater. One man was standing on the sidewalk, the same person who had been there before. Through the open doors came a roar of handclapping and some shouts.

" What are they yelling for?" he asked the lone smoker.

" They're calling for the author. The damn thing's a hit," said the blasé stranger.

At the same moment, Sam Smith emerged, his face all wreathed in smiles.

" Where the hell have you been?" he demanded. " They've been calling for the author for ten minutes."

" Is it a hit?"

" It's a wow."

" Will it make money?"

" Nothing can stop it."

" Well," said Ben, with a happy grin. " Do you think you could advance me twenty dollars. I have only ten cents in the world."

" You damn good sport!" exclaimed the manager. " Here you are. You can have five hundred if you want it, but if I'd known this, I'd have held you up for another twenty-five per cent of the show."

" Do I have to go back on the stage?"

" Naw. They'll get tired pretty soon. Come into my office and I'll give you a drink. You look like you needed it."

" I want to run back and congratulate June."

" Let her alone until the end of the last act. Don't you know that nobody is allowed back on an opening night. At any time one of the actors might go up in the air."

The sudden cessation of the applause caused both men to look into the theater. June, flushed and happy, a twinkle in her eye, stood in front of the curtain. She was completely self-possessed.

" Folks," she said, in her rich, clear tones, " it's lovely of you to like our play and to want to see our author. He's awful nice, but he's very young and very scared and I think he ran away. But I know he is terribly grateful, if he is anywhere about, to know that you love his play."

She stepped forward a pace and said with a fetching air of confidence:

" To tell you the truth, it would be dreadful if you hadn't just taken us to your bosom because the poor boy put every cent he had into this production and when the curtain went up to-night, I don't believe he had more than ten cents to his name. But this is between ourselves, and you won't tell anybody, will you?"

A man's voice bellowed:

" You bet we won't, you darling." A gale of hysterical laughter swept the house, then came a crash of handclapping, a stamping of feet, a burst of cheers. June looked alarmed, laughed, and ran off the stage, kissing her hand as she passed through the curtain.

Sam Smith was wiping his eyes with his handkerchief.

" Oh, the clever little girl, the clever little girl," he muttered. " Ben, that kid has put your show over a second time. The papers will eat up that curtain speech, and the tale of the frightened producer with a thin dime to his name is worth fifty thousand dollars worth of advertising. I bet you ain't sent her flowers."

" I forgot," Ben admitted, as he wiped the tears from his own cheeks.

" Take this fifty and get a big bunch for yourself and one for me. Make her sign her name to a five-year contract; she's worth her weight in gold."

" I'll do more than that, if I can," he promised.

Laden with flowers, he passed through the stage door at the end of the performance, to find a crowd upon the stage. Smith was there with several ladies, Pilgrim, Mary Clancy and other members of the company had friends who wished to congratulate them, but he saw only one couple, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Golding.

He had hoped never to set eyes upon Sally again lest she gain her old empire over him with a glance from her eye. There she was, in an evening wrap of ermine and gold, looking so amazingly beautiful that it seemed impossible that she could be real, while, beside her, Golding was looking at her with the eyes of an old man, hopelessly infatuated. Sally flashed her smile upon the successful producer, that smile which had intoxicated him, but Ben was incased in heavy protective armor, apparently; her darts struck it and rebounded. All that entered his mind was that she was probably furious that June, instead of herself, had experienced a triumph that night.

"Oh, Ben, I'm so glad. We're so glad, aren't we, Herbert?" she gushed.

"Congratulations," said Golding, dryly. "What a prize sucker I was to let you bunk me out of my interest in the play."

"You named your terms and I accepted them," Ben retorted, coldly.

"Yes. But you knew Sam Smith liked the show and I didn't. However, I carried off the real prize. Sally is worth a hundred successful plays."

"Oh, Herbert, how lovely of you," purred Sally, who took his arm between her two hands and squeezed it. "Where is June's dressing room, Ben? I want to congratulate her."

"Come this way," said the author. "June will be glad to see you, of course."

"She was quite good, don't you think? I couldn't have played it better myself, though, of course, June could never wear clothes."

"She never had good ones to wear," he said, sharply. "But now that she can keep her salary she will probably learn how."

June threw her arms around Sally's neck, and wept over her. To Golding, she said: "Sally's so young and helpless, Mr. Golding! You will be good to her."

"I appreciate my luck," he smiled. Knowing Sally as he did, Ben had it in his heart to be sorry for this elderly husband of a selfish young butterfly wife.

"We've come to take you and Ben to supper," said the bride.

"To-morrow night, please," June suggested. "I have a lot of things to talk over with Ben about the play."

"They can wait, surely."

"No, they can't," smiled June. "To-morrow night, if you want us to have supper with you, we will."

"Come, darling," cooed Herbert Golding. "We mustn't keep our friends waiting."

June made a grimace as they turned their backs.

"You got to hand it to the kid, Bennie," she commented. "I thought the old fox would eat the little goose; instead, she tamed him, led him to the altar and how she will put him over the jumps! Thank God, she's off my hands. Did you feel very bad when you saw them?"

"I guess I must have used up all my feeling during the play," he said, ruefully. "I don't think my heart missed a beat. She was lovely, though."

"Sure, and how she goes with the million dollar clothes. I'll be with you in a jiffy now. Got the price of a supper?"

"I borrowed it from Sam Smith."

"Then the show is a real hit; that's all I needed to convince me."

But June had to meet a lot of strangers, be fussed over by people she had never seen before and waste half an hour before she could escape with the author.

CHAPTER XXXI.

JUNE SIGNS A LONG TERM CONTRACT.

THEY found a booth in a half empty side street chop house where none of the guests looked as though they had been attending an important first night, ordered a steak with fixings, and sat back to regard each other contentedly.

"To think we're both on Easy Street," sighed June, happily. "Never again to have to duck the landlady because we can't

pay the rent. Gee, Ben, I hope we don't get swelled heads."

"You won't," he smiled. "If you see any signs of it in me, please jab me with a red-hot poker. Do you remember the night you broke into my room to tell me about Sally?"

"Everything started from that. And now you are a successful playwright!"

"I have no reason to be conceited about the play. If Green had not kidded me along, very likely I should never have finished it. Poor old Masterson was responsible for most of the good parts and you wrote all those comedy scenes. I don't deserve any credit for them. My heroine was silly and you made her human. Guy Pilgrim told me how to make the big scene in the second act click. There isn't much in the play that really belongs to me."

"Poor old Masterson! He can't help his weakness and he worked like a nigger until Green and Golding discouraged him. I was awfully glad that you put the line on the program that he directed the play, Ben. That was decent of you."

"I'm going to see that he gets his salary for the last two weeks. He did his bit, after all."

"You are awful nice, Ben," said June, with shining eyes.

"You are the real brick. Say, June?"

"What?"

"What would you think of a fellow that was dead gone on a girl and she eloped with another fellow and a few days later he was in love with another girl?"

"I don't know. It depends."

"I'm in love with you, June."

"You are not," she said, sharply. "You couldn't be. How could you?"

"I am. You are all the things that I thought Sally was, and I must have known it for weeks, but I shut my eyes because I thought I was in love ith her."

"Now, listen, Ben Ludlow. You're soft and sentimental because I jumped in and saved your show, and you are foolish with gratitude. I'm just a tough little nut of a chorus girl; maybe I've improved some on the surface, but I haven't changed much underneath. So don't you go saying something you'll be sorry for."

"You are the squarest, gamest, decentest, finest, straightest, and prettiest girl in the world, and you are worth a whole cartload of girls like your sister Sally. I want to marry you, June."

"Cracked," observed June in a voice which she tried to keep unemotional. "Loco. The wagon will be along in a minute to ferry him over to Bellevue!"

"Don't make fun, June. Can't you see I'm serious."

"You are in love with *Evelyn* in the play, not with me. Why, Ben, do you forget what I was doing when I first met you? I drank and smoked and swore. I was awfully tough."

"Rubbish! That wasn't the real you."

"I haven't had a drink since the night you wouldn't give me one in your room; but just the same, you don't want me. Honest, Ben."

"I intend to marry you, June."

"Ben," she pleaded—the corners of her mouth were drawn and she was winking away tears—"you'd be ashamed of me! They're liable to dig up pictures of me in the Summer Garden, and you'd hate to see your wife in the papers like that."

"Do you love me, June?"

"No, I don't." But her denial was very feeble.

"I think you do," he said, gazing at her with a searching glance which forced her to drop her eyes.

"You'd be ashamed of me. You'd hate me."

"You do love me. We'll be married as soon as I can get a license."

"It would be bad for the play if we got married. Any manager will tell you that."

"To hell with the play. June, you are the most bewitching, fascinating, delightful little devil in the whole wide world."

June sighed heavily, but her eyes were bright with happiness.

"If we must be married," she said, "we will keep it a secret until the play has run a long time and we have lots of money."

"I want to advertise it to the world."

"I guess I can have the say about the kind of marriage I want. It will be a secret, for a month, anyway."

" So long as you are mine, I don't care."

" Ben, are you hungry?"

" No."

" Neither am I."

" Let's go over to Callahan's "—they had taken their old quarters—" then I'll sneak into your room and you can hold me in your arms. You've never done that yet, Ben."

" I'll make up for lost time."

They paid their check and departed. On the way Ben demanded how long she had known that she loved him.

" Ever since you wouldn't give me that drink. Of course when you fell for Sally I knew it could never be, and I never did think we'd get married even after she eloped. Isn't it wonderful, Ben?"

" Glorious."

Back in the gloomy old lodging house they sat and talked for hours, this pair who were rich and happy simultaneously. At three in the morning Ben put on his hat and slipped out to buy the papers.

With trembling hands they turned to the reviews.

The critics had let them off easily. Several condemned the play as sentimental, full of old scenes and hackneyed characters.

" Where has this wonderful ingénue been hiding, that Broadway has not seen her before?" demanded one writer.

Ben read the question aloud.

" If he'd used his opera glasses he would have seen me at the Summer Garden," she said roguishly.

The total sum of the newspaper reviews was that " West of Broadway " would undoubtedly be a big popular success.

When it was breaking day June stole off to her room, the last night that she would sleep at Mrs. Callahan's.

Sam Smith was waiting at the theater when Ben entered his office shortly before noon. In the outer office he noticed a fat, slovenly looking blonde who seemed not unknown to him, although he could not place her—and, anyway, he was not interested.

" Good morning, producer," greeted the jovial Mr. Smith. " How you feeling today?"

" On top of the world," he answered joyously.

" You ought to be. A whale of a big demand from the ticket brokers, and enough sale at the box office for balcony seats to keep us out of the cut rates. We'll run a year, and get two more on the road. Provided that girl doesn't jump the track. Are you sure of her?"

" Reasonably. I'm going to mary her as quickly as I can get a license."

" That's the stuff. I'd marry her myself to keep her in the part. She's eighty per cent of the show. Now, something else. I've got a check from the Equity for the two weeks' salary guarantee. Half goes to me for advancing the pay roll Saturday. What do we do with the other half?"

" I think it belongs to Humbolt."

" Why? He never had a cent in the show. The whole guarantee was your money or Golding's, and you bought out Golding."

" Nevertheless, I owe him a debt of gratitude for making me write the play and persuading me to put up my own money to produce it."

" I figured you'd look at it like that, and I hate to give the rat anything. So I figured a way to take care of the matter."

" How?"

" Did you notice a big, fat blonde about fifty years old, waiting outside?"

" Why, yes."

" That's his loving wife. I sent for her. Now I'm going to call her in, deliver the check made out to him, and get a receipt. Who is a safer messenger than a man's wife?"

" None, I suppose."

Smith laughed. " She'll sign his name on the back, deposit it to her own account, and Humbolt Green has as much chance of ever getting a nickel of it as he has of going to heaven when he dies."

" But he could sue her—have her arrested for forgery."

" Say, she has enough on him to send him to jail for ten years. Shall I do it?"

" Sure, do anything," laughed Ben. " I have to hustle to meet June and then get down to the marriage license bureau."

THE END

The Proper Niche

By GORDON STILES

NO question ever had been raised as to the career which Earle Venner was destined to follow. Certainly, from the time he was old enough to understand, it had been understood that he would study medicine and surgery, eventually stepping into his father's place as the leading surgeon in Farnsworth, which comes to the same thing as stating that the elder Venner led the profession in Carruth County, Wisconsin.

And because of this understanding it is easy to account for the shock which Dr. Paul Venner experienced on a certain July morning when Earle, facing him across the breakfast table, said: "Dad, I don't want to go to medical school."

Dr. Venner abruptly set down the cup of coffee he was raising to his lips. "You don't *what?*" he demanded.

"I don't want to be a doctor," Earle reiterated, a touch of stubbornness settling about his mouth.

Nothing he could have said would have proved more upsetting to his father. Earle was all the old gentleman had; the boy's mother had died when the son was three years old, and since then Dr. Venner's hopes centered more and more about this only child, who had now just reached manhood. Earle had graduated from the State university a month before, and for some time had been slated for admission to the New York College of Physicians and Surgeons in September.

Dr. Venner stared at his son. "What's the idea, Earle? Are you leading up to a joke?"

"No joke, dad. It's only that I've been thinking things over, and have come to the conclusion that I'm not cut out to be a doctor."

"Nonsense!" said his father, a bit impatiently. Then he continued quietly: "How long have you been thinking things over, as you say, and what has led you to so startling a conclusion?"

"I'll never make a good physician. What's more, I know the reason why."

"So? Well, what is the reason?"

"The reason is that I'm not interested in medicine. As the time comes closer for

me to take it up seriously, I shy away from it. Can't bring myself to feel any enthusiasm over the prospect; it bores me. That's all. I'd save time by taking up something else."

Paul Venner walked to the window, and stood gazing into the street for a full two minutes. Earle waited patiently, watching his father—the sturdy frame, square shoulders, the well poised head, and the long, sensitive surgeon's fingers clasped behind the man's back. He suffered a momentary pang that he should be the cause of the disappointment he knew his words had brought, and wondered how his father would take what he regarded as a decision.

The doctor turned. There was no anger in his eyes, no trace of annoyance. "There has been a Dr. Venner in Farnsworth for three generations, Earle," he said. "I always expected—always wanted you to slip into the niche I shall leave vacant. On the other hand, I want you to be contented. You know I wouldn't try to force you to go on with anything you did not find pleasant. But tell me, Earle—what would you go into if you were to give up the idea of following my profession? What had you in mind?"

"Business, dad. I want to go into business. It fascinates me."

"Business!" Paul Venner's voice registered consternation. "You can't mean it, Earle! Money-grubbing in an office! So utterly foreign to anything the Venners have ever done! We have been a professional family—doctors, preachers, lawyers, scientists. I could understand your wanting to take up one of those careers. But—business! I can't grasp it, Earle."

Earle laughed.

"I suppose it sounds terrible. So blamed ordinary, and all that. But I hanker to 'money-grub in an office,' as you put it. Of course, it may be that is because I know nothing about business. I don't say I wouldn't tire of it. But, as I feel now, nothing appeals to me quite as much."

The father caught at the straw held out.

"Of course, that is it—in a nutshell. You have been so far removed from commercial matters all your life; it is all so strange to you that it is attractive. It's a case of 'Everybody's job is better than mine.' An old story, my boy. So that I believe going into business would not save time for you, only lose it. After the novelty had worn off you would tire of it quickly enough. Then the one, or two, or three years you had given to it would be wasted, while if you go on with your studies your education will be nearly complete by that time."

"See here, dad. I don't want to be obstinate in this matter. You know how I feel, and I'm glad you do. And, knowing that, what would you suggest?"

"I would like to think it over a bit, Earle. Let's drop the subject now, and I'll give you my conclusions to-morrow. That suit?"

"Righto. I'll do my best to meet your ideas, dad."

"Good, lad. We'll see."

And there the thing rested.

Next day the elder Venner said: "I've been thinking about our talk yesterday, Earle. And I have come to certain conclusions. I'm going to suggest a plan which, if it is agreeable to you, ought to clear the air as to your future."

"All right, dad. Let's have it."

"Well, then. Yesterday you admitted the possibility that you might be mistaken in thinking yourself cut out for business. It is on that possibility that my plan is based. For my part, I believe that the probability of your success as a physician has equal place with your chances in the business world.

"I have tried to leave out of my consideration the fact that the thought of you engaging in a commercial career is distasteful to me. If I did not feel that you would be happier as a successful surgeon than as a business man, I would not urge my views upon you. However, what I am asking of you is a little further trial. You know as little of medicine as you do of business. And I'd like you to go on and enter P. & S. as you planned. If at the end of two years (half the course) you have not decided that you are more interested in surgery than anything else—if you feel as you do now, I shall not lift a finger to prevent your taking up anything you choose."

"But, father—"

"It really is not much to ask, Earle. Two years may seem a long time at your age. And, even if you decide against continuing, I shall feel better about it than if you dropped the notion here and now. See what you make of it, Earle."

The son pondered, then said: "Very well, dad. I'll try it on. It's no more than fair to you. I want to be that at all times, you know."

"Thank you, Earle," said Dr. Venner.

On the train from Chicago, *en route* to New York and medical school, Earle encountered Wade Stoner. It was a pleasant meeting, the first in five years.

Wade, as a boy, had spent his summers with relatives in Farnsworth, and a strong friendship had sprung up between him and Earle, a friendship interrupted only by a sojourn abroad, where Wade had been learning the international angles of his father's business.

The elder Stoner was president of the Stoner Company, a world-famous advertising firm. Wade had just been made manager of the New York office, he told Earle, so that they would see much of each other in the metropolis.

Earle squirmed with envy. That was the sort of thing he ought to be doing—traversing the lanes of commerce, acquiring a broad outlook, which he felt could not be gathered in professional life.

He told Wade something of what was in his mind; confided the conditions under which he was going to New York. Wade was sympathetic, particularly so in view of the fact that he was enthusiastic about the advertising business, had taken to it with keen zest directly he entered his father's office. Thus, it is not strange that, before the journey ended, the pair arranged to share a suite at the Hotel Carson.

II.

In Farnsworth Paul Venner read his son's letter:

Dear Dad:

. It will please you to know that I am duly enrolled as a student in P. and S. On the train I ran into Wade Stoner. A bit of luck, that. We have hooked up together on the living proposition—at the Hotel Carson.

This arrangement, of course, makes things very much more pleasant than otherwise. Wade is managing the New York office of the Stoner Company. Doing mighty well, I should say.

Better send all my mail to the hotel. New York is very gay what with people coming back from holidays, and the theaters opening and all. So I expect we shall have plenty to occupy ourselves.

Affectionately,

Earle.

Of course, the doctor realized, the letter was hurriedly written, and short at that. But it did seem as if Earle might have devoted more than a scant line to the medical school.

Himself—well, he remembered his first letter home when he had gone there. A half dozen closely written pages, filled with chatter about the routine, his classmates, the professors, the operating theaters—

Dr. Venner sighed, laid the letter on his desk, and turned to the work of the day. He resolved to say nothing whatever about the P. & S. when he should write. Why worry, anyhow? Matters would come out all right in the end.

To employ a hackneyed expression—as a business man, Paul Venner was a rattling good surgeon. His fees were substantial, but save when payments for a number of major operations came in a bunch, it is doubtful if the man ever had been able to lay his hands on more than a couple of thousand dollars in cash.

He lived well, kept a good car, belonged to the best clubs in that part of the State. His office was well appointed and well staffed. Money came and money went; little of it stuck, which was a Venner trait.

Like an appallingly large percentage of medical men, Venner's choice of investments—on those occasions when he determined to be thrifty—was unfortunate. A safe deposit box half filled with worthless securities bore eloquent testimony to this. And, like other ill-advised speculators, he always came back for more. Always had, at any rate.

But now there crept into his mind an uneasiness concerning Earle—an uncertain-

ty about his son's future. He had not thought much about this until after the conversation that day in July. The possibility that Earle really might fail to qualify as an able physician and surgeon was disturbing. And, conceivably, this might turn out to be the case.

By the same token, the alternative, a business career, might also prove unsuitable. If he had nothing to leave his son when he should go, and the young man had not prospered—well, Paul Venner shuddered. The Venners never had lacked the means of material comfort, even if they had not accumulated much. Then and there Paul determined to guard the disposition of his money more carefully.

No more wildcat investments, no more yielding to the smooth arguments of wily stock salesmen, who promised him the earth and a little besides. An excellent resolution, no doubt.

He held to this plan as well as he could. But Earle's expenses were not light. That is, from the start Paul had sent a generous check on the first of each month, and he hesitated to cut this sum. He knew it was ample, and Earle never asked for more. It was hard to see where he could retrench in the upkeep of his menage and business establishment.

Thus, when a year had rolled by, and the net accumulation consisted of a couple of bonds which yielded five per cent, Paul Venner felt a sense of disappointment—and helplessness. It had been a good year for him; there ought to be more to show for it.

He yearned to see Earle, who had been prevented from coming home at Christmas time by a wicked attack of grip; wrote him that he would go to New York for a visit. Then wondered if he ought not to lay the money by, instead. But the eagerness expressed in Earle's reply decided the question.

En route, reviewing the letters he had received from Earle during the year, it seemed to him that they had breathed a spirit of contentment that was gratifying. He felt that his plan was succeeding. He fretted at the slowness of the train; he wanted to see Earle. He could tell then if the boy was happy—whether those cheerful letters had been composed with a definite motive.

III.

EARLE was on hand to meet the train at Grand Central, and one glance at his son's face told Paul Venner that the letters had not lied, that they had reflected faithfully Earle's frame of mind.

On the way to the hotel the father ventured: "You're in pretty good form, Earle. Everything going all right?"

"Splendidly, dad. But now that you're here, I'm going to forget all about work and have a real holiday. I've arranged things. It won't hurt you very much, either, I imagine."

"No. It's a good idea; I can do with a rest."

"Wade has declared a vacation, too. So we'll have a corking time. There's a good fight scheduled this week, and the theaters have a pretty fair line of offerings."

"Fine. Haven't seen a good mill in years. And not more than two or three good shows. Nothing would suit me better."

Thus the week, which was all Dr. Venner could spare, sped rapidly. He was satisfied and pleased. He congratulated himself on the success of his plan.

He had been worrying to no purpose, he told himself. Earle would come through as he had hoped, and there would be an end of it. In this frame of mind he entrained for home.

He had no regret over the expense of the trip, which had been considerately greater than he had reckoned on. But if he had it would have fled swiftly before the bit of luck which came his way when he had been at home three days.

For, as fate had it, R. Travis Gaines, multi-millionaire capitalist of New York, was seized with acute appendicitis when his private car was a few miles outside of Farnsworth, and Dr. Venner responded to the hasty call sent out as the train pulled in. He saw at once that Gaines was in a serious condition, and operated immediately.

Three weeks later, when the millionaire

left the local hospital, well on the road to perfect health, his secretary handed Dr. Venner an envelope containing a check for ten thousand dollars, with the compliments of Mr. Gaines!

Now, thought the doctor, when he had recovered from the shock of a fee many times greater than he had ever received, now is the time to sink a decent sum in substantial securities. Somehow, he did not feel that the need for so doing was as pressing as it had seemed a few months back. But he would look about.

Venner knew that he had no business reading that advertisement. The opening line of the text, which blared simultaneously from the pages of the leading newspapers, ought to be sufficient to put him off.

But the thing fascinated him, and he did not know why. Yes, he did. Because it was unlike any other appeal he had come across. It began, in gigantic type:

IF YOU COME IN WITH ME YOU MAY LOSE MONEY

The story was that of a famous automobile engineer, who for many years had built the cars turned out by one of the leading American companies. There had been friction and a breach. Now this man was appealing to the public for funds to enable him to compete with other manufacturers in the production of a car after his own design.

He promised nothing, the announcement stated. He had reason to believe that he could build a good car; as good, if not better, than any on the market. He felt himself competent to form an organization which would sell the cars. He wanted money—tons of it. But only from men who could afford to lose if things went wrong. Sportsmen. He wanted the backing of sportsmen, men who were willing to take a chance with their money, to gamble on one man.

With plenty of money with which to operate, he could obtain a plant and produce motor cars within sixty days, he believed. But he bound himself to nothing. He must be taken on faith or not at all. That was the substance of the opening advertisement, and it was signed by one Royal Mather, a name little known outside the industry, but which had stood for much to those who knew.

Subsequent advertisements were written in the same strain. At times the wording was such as seemed calculated to convince the prospective investor that he would kiss his money good-by the moment he exchanged it for stock certificates. The only promise was that if matters went well the stockholders would have obtained a sound investment at par.

For days Paul Venner followed these effusions, toying with the idea of proving that he was a sportsman. He would turn from these unusual messages to the dry-looking list of bond offerings by old conservative houses, and sigh. Ten thousand dollars at five per cent would mean five hundred dollars a year. A pittance!

He never knew exactly the process by which he arrived at his decision; he did not remember reading such a point. What he did know was that, one morning, he drew a check for ten thousand dollars and, two days later, added to the collection in his deposit box a certificate of one hundred shares in Royal Mather Motors, Inc.

The thing was done. Probably he had made a fool of himself. But he knew that if he had not gone in he would always have felt a suspicion that he was not a sportsman. Perhaps he was hooked, but if so, well, he was hooked, that was all.

IV.

Everybody knows all about the Royal Mather Motors, Inc. How Mather did make good, how he did produce cars within sixty days, how the dealers and public went loco over the new machine, how the factory was swamped with orders from the very outset. Then the acquisition of two more plants which were staggering, and the consequent boom of Royal Mather stock, so that, a short eight months after the formation of the company, what the investor paid one hundred dollars for was worth in the market eleven hundred!

In a daze, Paul Venner saw his ten thousand dollars grow overnight, as it were, into

one hundred and ten thousand. Then it was that he pulled out and bought his five per cents. A man can struggle along on something more than five thousand dollars a year. Earle would have this nest egg, if nothing more.

The doctor's satisfaction might have been greater still could he have known, that day when he placed his bonds in the box for safe keeping, that he had performed his last operation!

Two days later, as he sat at breakfast, the telephone in the library tinkled. He rose to answer it. But he never reached the instrument! Midway across the room he swayed slightly, and his hand sought his head.

A feeling of suffocation seized him, the while prickling pains ran through his body. He sagged to the floor just as the butler, obeying the repeated call of the telephone, appeared in the doorway!

Front page stories in the afternoon papers carried the news that Dr. Paul Venner, most famous surgeon in Southern Wisconsin, who had recently operated on R. Travis Gaines for appendicitis, had suffered a paralytic stroke. That, according to physicians who were in attendance, he would recover partially. But his right side and arm were so affected that he never could wield again the instruments of his calling. The doctor's son, Earle, who was studying medicine in New York, had been notified.

No need to notify Earle, however. In the early edition of an evening paper he had read the short dispatch, headed:

GAINES'S PHYSICIAN
SUFFERS STROKE

Not in New York, however! But in Philadelphia! He read the story, and an hour later he was on a westbound train, the wire stating that he was coming having crossed the one addressed to him.

Paul Venner was conscious and in possession of his mental faculties when his son arrived thirty hours later. But Earle did not at once tell him the story he knew he must repeat now. It was several days afterward, when the elder Venner had recovered sufficiently to realize that his professional days were over and to become reconciled, in a measure, to what lay before him, that he listened to his son's confession.

"I knew," said Earle, "within a month that it was no good. Being with Wade made me all the more keen for business. I talked to members of the faculty about it and they agreed that I probably was right. To a man, they advised me to go into business without further delay. Perhaps, one said, I would get it off my chest and come back. But he knew, as I knew, that nothing else would satisfy me.

"So Wade and I put our heads together. He would have taken me on in New York only he felt that the place to learn the business thoroughly was at the home office in Philadelphia. I felt as if I wasn't playing the game, as if I was welching on our agreement. And so I was.

"But I couldn't help it, dad. Wade and I worked it out. He forwarded my letters to me and posted those I sent you—that is, when I didn't get over to New York for the week end, which was pretty often. When you wrote that you were coming to visit me, he fixed it so that I could have the week off. And, dad—gosh! I've never enjoyed anything so much in my life as working for the Stoner Company! You're not going to bawl me out, are you?"

"Of course not. If you've found what you want, Earle. Are you getting on well?"

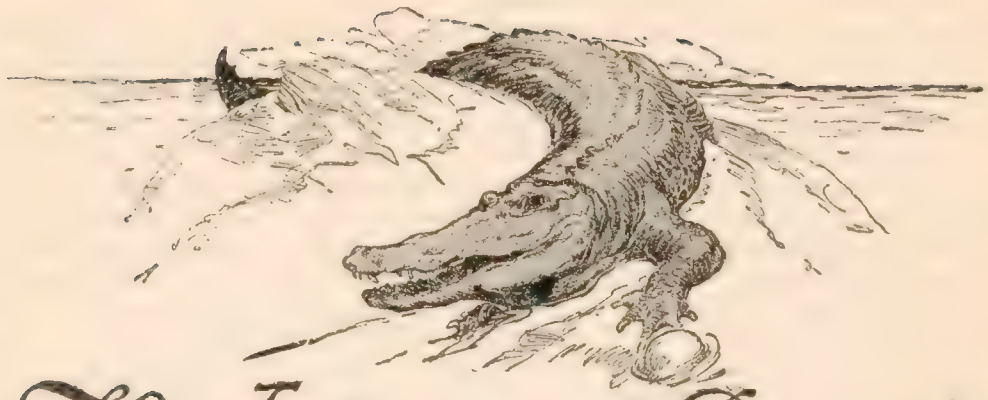
"I think so. Three raises in a year. I'm to go into the New York branch with Wade in a few weeks. Then, Mr. Stoner was greatly pleased with the manner in which I handled my first big job. I don't suppose it would mean anything to you, and you probably will be bored if I tell you about it. You see, there was a campaign to sell the stock of the Royal Mather Motors, Inc. And I—"

"Do you mean to say that *you* wrote those advertisements?"

Earle looked up in surprise. "I did. On my own. Did you read any of them?"

"Slightly!" said Paul Venner. "You needn't go any further, Earle. I'm sold!"

THE END



The Infant of Death

By F. ST. MARS

IN the beginning he was not remarkable, and there was nothing at all about him to suggest what was to follow. He was an egg—only, unlike most eggs, equal at the two ends. He was white and something near the size of an egg any old goose might lay.

Not that the egg could be seen, though. Some nine and three-quarter inches of sand covered him, and that sand was hot to the touch—too hot for most touches.

There was nothing else there in that place, apparently—just the sand, and the river's dazzling shallow edge, and the dancing heat flurry, and the brass shield of a sun hung up in a steamed sky. There came a form in yellow and green and black. It was long—about six feet. It was low—bang on the ground. It was not beautiful, and the tail of it was like the lash of a whip, a very cruel whip of the whippiest. Certainly it was a lizard, but equally certainly it was about the biggest thing in the lizard line nature has so far turned out. Men call them monitors, or "iguanas" in the vernacular, and they are very awkward propositions, whatever you call them.

Straight to the place where the eggs were—how did it know *that*, anyway?—slid that great thing, and there dug, dug like a dog, and with speed, as if it had no wish to be caught at the game and knew quite well what was underneath, also what would happen if it was caught.

About this time two dark knobs appeared, without sound or ripple, on the water some twenty yards out. They might, even if you had noticed their appearance, which is improbable, have been bits of floating stick, or weed, or the tops of a submerged branch, or again they might not. They certainly did not look anything for even a baby to bother its head about. The monitor came down to business, or rather the eggs, in very quick time, and, as oblivious of the heat as if it had been born in the infernal regions—which it might have been by the look of it—picked up an egg and made off.

The knobs sank noiselessly.

And the sun continued to beat down without mercy, and the sand grew hotter and hotter, and the heat flurry danced worse than ever, and a great gray crane with red wattles and a wonderful top knot, whom nobody noticed before because it had been so motionless, got up from the edge of the water suddenly, with a shriek of terror and fled.

Then the monitor came back again, running swiftly over that burning sand. Then the knobs reappeared again, in absolute silence, but only a few yards from the shore this time.

One egg, as it happened, had rolled a little clear from the rest when the latter were first disturbed. It was apparently just like the other eggs. So it was, really, only different in that it happened to be the precise and particular egg with which we have to deal.

It was also the precise and particular egg with which the monitor wished to deal, and the creature made a bee line for it at once. It caught the reptilian eye, one presumes.

The two knobs showed once again, and quite suddenly, much closer to the water's edge. There was a pause of exactly three seconds, while a most execrable stench of musk grew into the air, and then—horror upon horrors—one of the knobs winked. At least, it seemed to. It was an eye, a horrble and horny, wicked eye, and almost in the same instant it rose and turned into a long head and snout, that any one, not even drunk, could have mistaken for a log any day of the week.

The monitor paused above the egg, and opened its mouth to pick the white treasure up, and then — and then — well, it opened its mouth, that's all. The mouth remained open, and the monitor "froze," if I may be pardoned the expression in that awful heat, as stiff as a bronze fibula. It was staring at the head—had, in fact, caught sight of it for the first time. What followed was peculiar—also, it was rather more than instant.

There was a spurt of spray, and a form, gigantic and plated, shot straight up the sand slope, with the velocity almost of a seventeen-inch shell. Followed a single clash, as if an iron safe had that instant been shut, a report like the crack of a whiplash, a rush, a crackle among the dried reeds at the water's edge a few yards to the right, a crash on the waters beyond, and silence—dead and utter silence, broken only by the *lap-lapping* of the ripples and the *ping-g-g* of an inquisitive big fly.

And there, motionless as a felled tree, and nearly as large as some trees, high and dry upon the sand, with its nightmare snout within an inch of the eggs, lay the biggest and most villainous-looking old she crocodile that you ever dreamed of. She it was of the knoblike eyes, who had been on guard all along. She had charged up the sand, snapped, the monitor had spun, whipped with his tail, taken the reeds with a rush, and landed upon the water almost spread-eagled, all—all, mark you—in seven and three-quarter seconds.

Later that monster she-devil covered the eggs up again, and sank back noiselessly into the world of slime and ooze whence she had come. And an ichneumon—who was like a magnified brown ferret, something, but was no relation, even distant, of any ferret's—who had stolen out to the end of the nearest cover, preparatory to making a raid upon those very eggs, ere the monitor came and upset his calculations, stole away again in silence, thinking, possibly, that any meal, even a venomous snake—which they kill—might be more healthy than an omelet of those eggs, with that huge mother of death on guard over them night and day unseen.

That evening, before his time, the baby crocodile inside the long egg, which the monitor had so nearly taken, hatched out. It may have been the moving about that hurried matters, or the extra warmth, or something else. Anyway, it hatched out into a male baby crocodile, just simply a crocodile in miniature, with the horribly complacent set grin of the crocodile, the fixed, leering eyes, the stubby reptilian legs, the horribly handlike feet, and the pot belly, all complete—a crocodile, you might say, like a young plant, ready made. Also the character, the most hateful character and loathsome temper in the world, was ready made. It never improved. It never grew worse; it couldn't.

Dawn, swift and wonderful, as dawns are in that land, raced up over the horizon and gave our baby crocodile away, immovable as a mummy, at the brink of the river. He looked like a plaster cast, and behaved like one up to a certain point—a plaster cast only a few inches long.

A big, buzzing bluebottle fly, bursting

with busy self-importance, settled within an inch or two of his nose, his horrible nose. It might have settled within a mile or two, for all the effect it had upon the baby crocodile. He just remained like a stuck pig, as the impolite saying has it, with his fixed and vacuous grin.

Nothing happened for a minute or two—absolutely nothing at all. Then it did. At least, it had. The crocodile was not on the spot where he had been, but was on the spot where the bluebottle fly had been. I suppose he moved there. Anyway, that is the natural supposition, but "move" is about a hundred miles an hour too slow a word to use in this case. The bluebottle fly was still there—inside the baby crocodile.

Go catch a bluebottle fly who knows exactly what your game is, and then imagine how that baby crocodile had shifted from one spot to the other. Yet, mind you, once the jaws had snapped—with a horrible hint of what was to come in future years—he switched instantly back into the plaster-cast act, and no more moved than a stone. Rum beasts, soulless and inscrutable as death, their godfather.

During the course of that long, aching, blistering morning that baby crocodile sent two more bluebottle flies to keep the first from feeling lonely, and added a cricket, overtaken by the day, a butterfly, come to drink, a tse-tse fly, fresh from a passing giraffe, whose great padded foot so nearly came down upon him and cut off his career ere it had well begun, that there was only fourteen inches between them.

Later a little fish, pursued by a less little fish, came ashore through the tepid shallows, and lay flapping on its side in silver flashes, like a heliograph, and the baby crocodile moved again, and the little fish—didn't, that's all!

The budding crocodile was already in the water, which was to be more than half his world for so many terrible years, when the ponderous bulk of his old fiend of a mother came clumsily down the bank, with about thirty of his brothers and sisters more or less in her vicinity. There had been forty-one, but the balance had vanished mysteriously into nowhere—mostly via ichneumon and monitor, I fancy—in the interval since they were laid.

Our crocodile, however, a self-sufficient little son of Satan from the first, had already a good start of his brothers and sisters, and he never lost it throughout his checkered career. Larger than any of them, to begin with, he had by that time discovered that his teeth were made for other purposes than picking. He had hunted and slain by his own efforts and with his own jaws, and he had been hunted and all but slain by a four-pound tiger fish, in his turn.

He had tasted blood, and had lost a little of his own to a bigger crocodile, whose headlong rush, however, only succeeded in inflicting a scratch. Nevertheless, until it stopped bleeding, even that scratch was almost his ending, for it seemed to call up every ravenous devil of the waters, one or other of whom would most assuredly have ended his career then and there at the beginning, had he not invited himself to the bank and stayed there till times were brighter.

As his brothers and sisters came down the bank our young crocodile—baby, by this time, would be a mere mockery of a word to call him—lay along the surface of the shallow water, just his two eyes poking out, watching, watching, watching forever, with that appalling, still persistence and patience that makes all crocodiles such a nightmare.

He saw them sprawl, saw them snap at insects and each other with less brotherliness than the average fiend; beheld the swirl and knife-edge dash, as a small tiger fish took the first one that blundered out into the deep; watched a greater swirl, and stared unmoved at the open jaws of another crocodile, who took the second little idiot that investigated deep water; and saw, too, the biggest swirl of all, and heard the whole air about fill with a horrible reptilian hiss, as his mother shot at the baby killer like some immense battering-ram, and the two went down together in an inferno of slashing jaws and whirling spray.

Then our little crocodile got busy on his own account. Out of the brazen sky a hissing came, quite different from the horrible

utterance of his mother, and for the fraction of an instant a shadow crossed the molten sun. There was no time to think, barely time to act. Only his tail threshed like a steamer's propeller, and he shot forward like a little wicked torpedo, in the very same instant as something hit the water behind him and on the spot where he had been, but wasn't then, if I may put it so, with an explosion like a falling shell.

What new form of die-quick that precise phenomenon might be he had no desire to wait to inquire. It might have been a pelican, or a fish eagle, or an osprey—not the kind that has anything to do with hats—or a meteorite, for all that youthful crocodile knew or cared. His one crying need at that moment was deeper water, and he charged into it, only to be instantly charged in turn by a yellow and silvery shape, with flat head, blunt nose, and bristling whiskers, whose teeth clashed like a steel trap less than an inch and a half above the root of his tail, and would have snapped on it if he had not in the same fraction of time twisted half sidewise, quicker than you can follow.

That latest enemy rejoiced in the title of otter, and the crocodile remembered that lithe form with the whiskers as an abiding terror for many a long day, because of its amazing agility and speed. It had missed him then, but he felt no confidence in its doing so on the next occasion.

Night came and added fresh terrors to the scene.

He heard the voices of two lions, each answering each, with reverberating thunders, as they hunted up the river bank. Also the many times magnified grunt of an old bull hippopotamus, and shot up the sandy bank nearly two feet in his terror, as one, round-backed, wet, and stupendous, came up within a few yards of him and began to splash mountainously ashore. He listened also, for the first time, to the peculiar throaty grunt made, somewhere over the black waters, by a big male of his own kind, and the nastily suggestive echoing snap as the " twelve-footer " shut his villainous jaws.

Then some antelope came down to drink, and because he lay in the shallows and because they took good care only to come to the shallows, he was actually frightened—though he never moved a scale or blinked an eyelid—at the nervous approach and mad stampede of these graceful creatures, cowed by a lifelong fear of his tribe. Later a brother and sister slid ghostily up through the water beside him, and hung, as he was hanging, motionless as any log, with eyes only, those horrible, cruel eyes, alone showing.

They beheld a herd of zebras trot quietly down to refresh, saw how they drank, as it were in relays, one eye on the water and one back behind over the shoulder, and at the same time saw two other eyes, far larger than his own, appear upon the glassy surface, some distance farther out.

At this moment a beetle, whirring by like an airplane, but apparently quite out of control, hit an overhanging twig with a loud tap, and fell upon the surface, where it remained on its back, whirling round and round as if attacked with brain fever. The double small streak that followed represented the two young male crocodiles moving from their floating point to that beetle. The big single streak that followed that represented the big crocodile who owned the eyes, farther out, shifting from where he was to the nose of a drinking zebra mare.

Neither reptile got its prey. The big one because the little ones had alarmed the zebra and caused her to leap back in time; the little ones because they collided, open-jawed, at the point of arrival, the whirling beetle.

The beetle was swept clear by the eddy of the double rush, but the jaws remained there open and locked for a moment, both horrible little brutes motionless as little bronze ornaments. Then they shut.

What followed might be seen in a nightmare, it might be conceived in D.T.'s, a man might watch it in an attack of the brain; but the real thing, as seen there in the dark, mysterious water and the green slime, lit by the cruel, cynical eye of a callous moon, watched by the combatants' own leering, absolutely motionless little horror of a sister, waiting only to seize as

much from the body of the vanquished as her infant jaws would let her, was—devilish. Also it was indescribable—at least, by me.

Heaven send I may never see another fight like that one—it was too much like sudden insanity. The fighters were too young, and they had been too friendly half an hour before, lying with each other's head on each other's back; and it was so obvious that until those beastly miniature jaws actually closed neither reptile had the least intention of attacking the other, and that then, in that second, frenzy, in some hellish, cold-blooded form, flashed to the dull, infant, reptilian brain of them straight from the serpent in hell, had seized them, so that they would, in blind convulsions, rend anything, brother, sister, you, or me, mother—anything, even their own selves, I believe, in their torment—I can call it nothing else—of loathsome rage.

What would have been the end of that fight nobody knows. What was, was startling enough. It was like the firing of a torpedo, only, in that scene at any rate, rather worse, because this torpedo was very much alive and boasted a weight of ten pounds. You behold it, a silvery shape, with teeth, each of which fitted into a socket in the opposite jaw, hurtling straight up out of that terrifying black void of the river at night, at the speed of knots, open-jawed.

There was a rush, a swirl, a crash, a snarl of falling water, a bubbling of foam, a silver flash like sheet lightning, and a boiling confusion, as all sank out of sight again, and the awful silence of the wilderness night got up and smothered everything down.

Only there was a little ripple, as our crocodile, torn and bleeding, headed for shore like one pursued by demons, and another ripple, as his sister headed for deep water—where she would assuredly get buried by a larger crocodile—and the little seething of bubbles breaking all about, where the fish, which was a tiger fish, had sunk. Their brother had gone—in a snap, in two halves, and in silence, into the maw of the terrible, dreaded tiger of the waters.

And that is how the baby crocodile lived and survived to grow into a big crocodile, the biggest on the river, but that is another story. Perhaps I will tell you it some day.

THE END

WHY?

WHY did you smile on that starry night,
When the moon on the range crouched low?
Why were your blue eyes soft and bright,
If you really meant I must go?

Was it the hush of the great, wide place,
Or the sweep of the southwest sky?
Was it the breeze that flushed your face,
Or was it, happily, I?

Why did you let me dream and hope
And give me your hand to press
If it was only the moon-laved slope
That awakened this tenderness?

Tell me, now, to go, if you will.
I shall mount and shall ride again
Over the ridge of the farthest hill;
But tell me you loved me then.

H. A. Woodbury, Jr.

The Noose

By RAYMOND EMERY LAWRENCE

HIS elder sister, superstitious, had given him his first intimation of the danger that lay in contemplating symbols of misfortune.

He was perhaps ten years old; he had been playing with a small rope, making at its end a hangman's noose, an art learned a few days before from an old man with an alluring past which included a term as sheriff in a frontier county. He exhibited proudly to his sister the neat noose he himself had made, an artistic knot with just the proper number of turns, all calculated to break an imaginary culprit's neck with the nicest facility.

To his surprise his sister did not share his gratification.

"You had better watch out," she told him, shaking a warning finger. "If you play with such a thing, some day when you grow up you may have it used on you!"

Thereafter, hangman's knots, because dangerous to play with, became the most enticing joy of his boyhood. They fastened upon his morbid mind both as dangers and as pleasurable things to construct. As some persons whittle for diversion, Carew fashioned the knots by which doomed men are sent to eternity.

He fashioned knots, and he tested their effectiveness—on cats and stray dogs. He did it secretly. No one else would have understood the grim pleasure he found in noting the perfect action of the favorite knot.

They would have thought him cruel; they could not have closed their minds to the grotesque contortions of the victimized animal and focused all their attention upon the mechanics of a small rope with a large knot so set under the angle of a jaw as to snap a vertebra at the end of a carefully judged drop.

In his thirty-first year he hanged a man.

He did this secretly also, the victim being a menace not in the eyes of society, but in the eyes of Carew alone. Carew had feared Judson Whittaker from boyhood. He had an idea that Whittaker had once glimpsed a boyhood experiment on a stray dog.

It was in Whittaker's barn that the experiment had been conducted; Whittaker, a grown man, had come softly in. Evidences of the experiment had been hastily concealed from Whittaker's gaze. But in the years that followed Carew always had the impression that there was contempt for him in the aging farmer's eyes.

At the age of thirty Carew was the prosperous owner of the finest hundred and sixty acres of bottom land in Salsbury Bend, proud of his huge, modern barn, with its electric lights, its cement floor, its various, up-to-date mechanical contrivances for the saving of labor; proud of his tractor, his truck, his new automobile, which had cost a thousand dollars more than the usual run of cars in that section; proud of his new house, with its sun porch, its red cement walks, its just-finished grounds, with rock-inclosed flowerbeds.

Proud of all this, and of the fact that Doris Kenyon, none other than the daughter of Amos Kenyon, Slaterville's banker, was within the month going to share it with him.

Doris was fond of dumb animals. She displayed this affection one Sunday by picking up from the roadside—they had been trying out the new car—a homeless pup, taking it into the car, stroking its scrawny body, and causing Carew to do likewise.

Responsive to her mood, he had waxed indignant along with her at the inhumane person who had turned the dog out upon the world. With the car parked by the roadside, the pup in his lap while Doris fed it from a lunch basket, he had seen Whittaker drive by.

Whittaker seemed to glance significantly at him; a sort of half smile appeared on Whittaker's face—a knowing smile that was followed by a grunt. Carew detected the grunt very plainly, for the road was narrow at this point, causing Whittaker to bring his car to a creep as he moved past.

At first Carew tried to assure himself that Whittaker's grunt arose from irritation at the road being partly blocked, but quickly he lost refuge in such an explanation: it was all too evident that Whittaker's grunt and the expression preceding it arose from seeing him fondle the dog.

On the days that followed the strange smile seemed to continue on Whittaker's face whenever he met Carew; Carew grew to fear that smile, grew to fear what it portended—the tale of an episode so in contrast with his attitude toward the dog Doris and he had picked up that were it to come to Doris's ears her sensitive soul would be horrified.

Whittaker's removal seemed the only course. And hanging, both because as a means of ending life it appealed the most to Carew, and because it seemed to him the safest way, was the method of removal chosen.

In all Carew's life he had never heard of murder being committed with a rope; all men found dead at the ends of ropes were considered suicides. In Whittaker's barn, Carew, one night, fixed the means of murder.

He attached a rope to the roof beam. The noosed and knotted end of the rope hung down through a square hole in the loft floor, coming within seven or eight feet of the floor below. The rest had been easy.

It was quite dark in Whittaker's barn even in daylight. Lit only by the smudgy lantern which Whittaker carried as he entered his barn at four thirty that morning, the barn was a darksome place, full of black shadows. In the loft above the floor opening it was pitch black.

Then Whittaker crawled up through the square opening to throw hay down for his horses and cows, he left his lantern hanging on a nail in the wall below, feeling his way into the loft and utterly unsuspecting Carew's presence or the presence of the brailed-up rope. It had been very easy; as Whittaker stepped to the floor beside the hole a dexterous motion of two hands had placed the noose about his neck, the knot at one side, while simultaneously a forceful push with a knee had sent him over the edge.

He had clawed a little, instinctively, as he fell through, but it hadn't mattered; the ten-foot drop and the perfect knot had been sufficient.

II.

CAREW continued prosperous. At thirty-five, due to his bank account and his intimacy with Kenyon as son-in-law, he was regarded as one of the most prominent men in the community.

At forty he ceased from farm labors, except in a supervisory way, spending most of his time attending meetings of various farmers' organizations, electioneering, boosting this or that enterprise, man, or legislation. He was a looked-up-to individual.

He had served a term as county commissioner; there was talk of his being sent to the State Legislature. On the morning of his fortieth birthday he finished shaving with extra care and inspected himself in the glass with satisfaction.

Prosperity had kept him from aging. It had made him sleek. He saw a firm-chinned man with rather thin lips, a beaked nose, a high forehead surmounted by heavy black hair, a pair of curving, shaggy brows, eyes of a steely-gray.

He looked quite distinctive, he thought. He visualized the picture in a huge gold frame beside other notables in the State House. He was particularly pleased with the eyes, their piercing aspect.

"Straightforward gaze!" he thought. "Certainly anything but a guilty one!"

Still filled with pleasant visualizations he entered his bedroom and was soon in the act of selecting a tie. He had long been partial to bow ties and was about to choose one of several which lay in the dresser drawer when he noted on top of them a small parcel done up in paper and ribbon-string with a card, "To George, from Doris—Birth day Greetings!" attached to it.

He knew it for a tie, even before he tore away the wrappings; and a tie it was. Not a bow, but a four-in-hand. He did not put it on, however.

For the past ten years there had steadily grown in him an abhorrence for four-in-hands they reminded him of the tying of a certain kind of knot which reminded him in turn of a deed that he attempted to forget. Also, they seemed so closely allied to the tying of the certain kind of knot that they brought back too forcibly his sister's words of the dim past.

The action of tying a four-in-hand seemed somehow to antagonize fate, a fate kind to him, but always uncomfortably uncertain of mood. For ten years he had religiously eschewed his morbid diversion of tying nooses that could break necks or even remind him of such a thing.

His wife found him starting to pick up a familiar bow tie. "Thanks for the present," he mumbled, "but I've forgotten how to tie that kind."

With a protest at his ignorance, his wife tied the new tie for him, leaving him with a vague fear troubling his mind.

At the breakfast table he forgot his fear in the mail that had just arrived, opening the letters with gusto—a sheaf of them that in one way or another gave him an added sense of his prominence, the dignity and possible fame of his future.

Letters from prominent men, flattering by their signatures; letters from lesser persons, flattering of contents. Letters from private individuals and also from important public offices.

One letter in particular added to his sense of prominence. The envelope bore the name of a State official on its corner. He looked at it closer; then the pleasurable feeling left, giving way to a slight start of fear. It was from the State penitentiary!

He knew of no reason why he should receive a letter from the State penitentiary, and he opened the envelope with a premonition of catastrophe. He stuck his fingers, slightly trembling, inside.

It was not a letter after all; it was a card. He drew it out. It was a black-bordered card with his name, "George T. Carew," written in a bold hand on a blank in the center of some printed matter. The sight of the black border surrounding his name, his full name, caused him to shudder.

He plunged with a little spurt of desperation into the printed matter. When he had finished reading it, he found his wife looking at him curiously.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing in particular!" he answered. "The warden at the State pen is rewarding some of his constituents by inviting them to witness a hanging. He invited me!"

"When is it to be?" asked his wife.

"Eight thirty Friday morning!"

"That's to-morrow— You're not going, are you?"

Carew took a sip of water from his glass and swallowed with difficulty. "I ought to go," he said. "It's just one more chance to get before the public; and I might meet influential people there—"

His wife nodded. Carew looked again at the black-bordered card, and again swallowed hard.

"Yes, I'll have to go," he reiterated. "Can't afford to lose a chance of getting in the public eye; there'll be an account of my attending in the Slaterville *Advocate*. And then there's the prominent men to be met!" Deep within him, however, were quite different urges.

He finished breakfast hurriedly and climbed into his car. He had been intending going to Slaterville that morning; instead, as soon as he came to a fork of the road out of sight of the house, he turned out upon a little traveled thoroughfare that led away from town. There he idled along —and thought. And the more he thought, the more he was aware of the choking sensation in his throat.

He had to attend the hanging. It would be dangerous not to. For ten years he had deemed himself secure from his crime, but there may have been some slight clew; something that remained and brewed in some man's mind.

Perhaps this invitation from the warden was part of a deep plot; a test! Secret Service agents sometimes worked for years unraveling a mystery. The Whittaker "suicide" had been considered a mystery; some persons, he recalled, had been rather skeptical of the suicide theory.

Perhaps the Secret Service agents were in league with the warden. He had not expected an invitation; he did not personally know the warden; it was a little surprising that the warden, whom he did not know, should include him in the group of persons to witness the event of Friday morning!

No, it wouldn't do to show fear. At all costs, he must be on hand, and with a grip on himself.

Yet, for the same reason he had eschewed for ten years the tying of a certain knot, he would have given much to stay away.

III.

Tracy Stickels also would have given much to keep from attending the event scheduled to take place at the State penitentiary at half past eight Friday morning. He was the man they were to hang.

While Carew contemplated fearsomely the ordeal from the seat of his idling machine, Tracy Stickels sat in his cell in Murderers' Row and listened to the footfalls in the corridor beyond—listened with the intensity of a wild animal. There was a possibility, one chance in a thousand, that he *could* escape the dread function of the morrow.

Late in the afternoon two visitors were admitted to see him—a woman and a man. A guard stood watchfully by; yet when the woman and the man departed, Tracy Stickels possessed a small but hard-shooting automatic. All night its cold but reassuring metal pressed against the skin of his stomach, while his brain went over and over a plan of swift action.

Carew was haggard when he arrived at the warden's office. He had slept fitfully; his sleep, poor as it was, had been filled with disquieting dreams, common objects resolving themselves into hangman's knots and other closely connected paraphernalia.

In particular he dreamed of the hanging he was to witness—a distorted picture that it was death to view, and which he found himself viewing with a feeling that doom was settling upon him.

The warden, a genial, fleshy man with a cigar, was busy shaking hands with a group of friends and acquaintances who had just arrived. For a few moments Carew waited in the background; then, pushed forward by a man whom he knew, he found himself grasping the warden's hand.

"This is Mr. Carew," his friend was say-

ing. "One of the up-and-coming men down our way!"

Carew attempted a jocular remark; then inwardly cursed himself for it, his voice having burst out nervously.

The warden said nothing, but the geniality seen on his face while greeting others, seemed now to have vanished. He appeared to eye Carew sternly.

In the background once more Carew tried to assure himself that the warden's look of sternness was merely a look of curiosity at his, Carew's, odd behavior. He began moving into the group that now surrounded the warden, trying to catch his eye, trying to enter into that geniality which the warden had for others; but when he did, he found the warden staring at him as before.

At a few minutes after eight the warden and spectators filed into the prison yard and drew up before a specially built contrivance of posts, yellow pine boards and a dangling rope.

They waited expectantly and ill at ease. Men consulted their watches frequently. There was little talk.

Faced by the instrument of boyhood interest, Carew found himself viewing it with a return of morbid pleasure.

He knew every detail embodied in a legal hanging. The old ex-sheriff who had taught him the hangman's knot had regaled his morbid imagination with tales of countless executions.

He had described the preparatory rope-stretching that insured a jerk of sufficient snap to break the neck; Carew himself had included this rope-stretching in his activities of the dim past. He had described the manner of tying the hands and adjusting the black cap.

He had told of the errors whereby a hanging could be messed up. Once, he said, an inept sheriff had almost severed the victim's head from his body. Sometimes, when the knot had not been set properly, the victim died by strangulation—in which event he kicked convulsively for many minutes; Carew knew by visual experience about this last phase of hanging also.

He looked at the snakishly dangling noose and wondered feverishly if the warden had taken the stretch out.

He noted the silk padding of the noose with interest, and a snort of contempt. What use was there for silk padding on a noose, if the man's neck were broken promptly. Doubtless these penitentiary wardens, getting their jobs not through qualifications, but through politics, were prone to botch hanging jobs.

Still, the padding was primarily for another purpose—keeping the man's skin intact left him better appearing. Carew stepped up closer. Yes, the rope appeared to have been stretched. Also, the noose was knotted properly; there were just the right number of turns about the two inner ropes!

The drop seemed just the proper length, too—providing the victim was not too lean! All in all, this warden seemed to know his business!

Carew felt himself being swept away on a tide of morbid excitement; all his boyhood questings for morbid pleasure were about to culminate in something perfect, something eminently satisfying.

For a moment he steeped himself in expectation; then dimly came a nearly forgotten voice: "If you play with such a thing, some day when you grow up you may have it used on you!"

He found the sentence changing, paraphrasing itself in his mind: "If you take pleasure in viewing such a thing, some day you may have it used on you!" It paraphrased itself still further: "If you look upon such a thing, some day it may be used on you!"

Carew glanced away; but in an instant, as if clutched by a force too strong for his will to combat, he was again gazing at the dangling noose.

He looked at his watch. It was eight twenty; in ten minutes the man would be dropping through the trap! He attempted to submerge the thrill of pleasure in the thought that he must not take joy from such a sight. He was gripped with alarm; a strange, merciless force seemed to have overcome him; seemed to hold him face-forward to the gallows, while something unseen laughed sardonically.

The rope had been dangling over the edge of the scaffold. Some one brailed it up in readiness. Carew could feel the thing

on his neck. His muscles contracted as if trying to save himself from the neck-breaking jerk.

This was a new phase of things, this feeling. Perhaps it was an omen. He shut his eyes and, opening them, found the scaffold endowing itself with a peculiar expression.

Houses had expressions—somber, or cheerful; now the scaffold seemed to have taken on personal qualities likewise. Looking at it, it seemed to project to him a message of sinister intimacy.

The more he stared at it, the more intimate it became in its expression. The rope, he noted, seemed to swing toward him!

He looked intently at the rope. Was it accident, that it swung toward him of all persons? He had an illuminating flash of knowledge: Perhaps *things* had souls! Perhaps there *was* something in the danger of contemplating certain objects—the danger of producing in them that *favor,* that gruesome *intimacy* which seemed to emanate from the scaffold with its swinging noose!

"Good God!" muttered Carew.

The warden, a pace from him, eyed him queerly.

IV.

Carew was not a thinking man, except in a minor way, in his next act; he was merely a bundle of fear-inspiring convictions deep-rooted in superstition.

He did not run, as was his panicky impulse. His escape from the grounds, his escape from viewing or being near the hanging, an escape that now seemed imperative, must be a stealthy one. There was enough of the thinking individual left in him to tell him that! He must create no more suspicion than could be helped.

He stole softly away from the crowd, noting the hands of his watch point to eight twenty-five. He came to the wall of one of the stone buildings and nonchalantly lit a cigar, looking back at the crowd, and at the warden, as he scratched the match on the stones. The warden did not observe him, he saw with relief. Breathing thankfully, he sidled toward the main gate, covering the last few yards of the approach to it with an easy stride.

A man with a rifle in a tower beside and above the gate looked down upon him. Carew handed up the black-bordered card with an apologetic, "Can't stay."

He had meant his words to be jocular and bold, but instead they were strained and hardly above a whisper. The man in the tower did not seem to notice anything amiss, however, and pulled a lever which opened the gate slightly.

Carew passed through and walked toward his car, parked on the other side of the roadway outside the prison grounds. He cursed himself for leaving the black-bordered card with the guard. Suppose the guard should look closely at it!—suppose the name, "George T. Carew," should be of significance to him?

He would keep the card and turn it in, and maybe tell of the odd manner of the one who handed it to him! If there was anything in the possibility that the invitation had been tendered as a test, that he was being watched, then that card would be a tangible, incriminating link.

With his mind a welter of fears and almost expecting to be called back at rifle-point, Carew climbed into his machine.

The car bounded forward like a frightened horse. Carew had not intended to depart in such a swift manner—it would be another link of incrimination; but his nervousness caused him to handle the controls like an amateur. He throttled down immediately to a sedate speed and with a strange foreboding felt the bulk of prison stone recede behind him.

He looked at his watch, finding it eight twenty-nine. With nerveless fingers he began stuffing it back into his vest pocket when, suddenly, a rifle cracked, the sound followed by more crackings.

Unconsciously he speeded up, the motor roaring, the car weaving back and forth across the road, threatening to turn turtle. For a breathless moment he struggled to steady the machine; then, as it straightened out and hugged the road's center, he looked around.

Dimly he could see the prison buildings—and something else.

Behind him, barely distinguishable in a cloud of dust, was another car!

He threw on full power and daring to look in no other direction but straight ahead, hurtled forward at seventy miles per hour. The rifle cracklings died away. He breathed a sigh of thankfulness then heard the clangor of a bell punctuated by a series of deep booms.

That this was the prison's warning to the countryside, Carew had no doubt. He considered calmly as possible the situation.

He had been right in his fears the invitation had been a test. He had been watched. He had been allowed to depart the scene. The Secret Service agents and warden had shrewdly concluded his guilt would not permit him to view, but his departure had been allowed merely because it would serve to incriminate him!

His running away had been a mistake, a terrible mistake. For an instant he thought of turning back, brazening the thing out, explaining his departure as the result of a congenital faint-heartedness, an inability to view violent scenes of any kind.

He pictured himself shamefacedly confessing: "The idea of seeing a human being hanged got too much for me—I always was chicken-hearted—" But the shots!—what about the shots? They would not have shot at him unless pretty well convinced—

Carew held straight on. He listened and heard again the tolling of the bell, the boom of the prison gun. Arousing the populace! But how could it recognize in a man in civilian garb one to apprehend on the strength of a prison alarm?

Carew sensed hope—and lost it again at thought of radio and telephones. Messages of course were going out to all points of the compass! He seemed to feel the very atmosphere vibrate with terse but unmistakable descriptions of himself—descriptions that would set every town and village on the alert for him!

He flashed past a sign which stated: "Three miles to Cedarville." Frantically he throttled down. It would never do to enter a town, he must keep to the country districts!

The road along which Carew drove was bordered by occasional fields interspersed with intervals of stumpage and stretches of second growth firs. As he reduced speed he found himself rolling along a piece of road shaded by firs for apparently a considerable distance.

The forest gave him a sense of protection. He had an impulse to leave the car and dash headlong into the murky depths of the wooded area. When, a hundred yards farther on, he noted a little-traveled road lead off the main thoroughfare and into the forest he turned the car into it without a moment's hesitation.

The branch road was very narrow and deeply rutted, but dry—at least, at its start. After a swaying, lurching drive of a few hundred feet, however, it began to descend into what Carew feared might prove a swamp.

He was correct in his fears. The ground grew damp, the ruts deeper and showing traces of water. The wheels sloshed through small puddles and slipped incessantly in a scumlike mud that surfaced the road.

In one place a puddle had been filled with small fir boughs. In running onto these with a rear wheel there was a crackling sound, then a wild splutter as the wheel, breaking through, dug itself deeper and deeper in the mud the branches had ineffectively covered.

Fear in his heart, Carew leaped out and began scurrying for twigs and broken limbs to stuff beneath the sunken wheel. Mosquitoes hummed in clouds about his head and hands. He fought them off oathfully and filled the hole.

He tried the motor but the wheel remained imbedded. He sprang out and rushed for more limbs. A sound halted him.

A machine was approaching!

It was coming from the main road, and it was very close. For an instant Carew was rooted in indecision, then indecision vanished: long before he could get his machine clear the other must be upon him! Obeying the impulse of a hunted animal Carew plunged into the forest.

Branches slapped his face, briers cut his wrists and legs, leaf-hidden logs tripped him. He ran without plan other than to put as much distance as possible between himself and the road with its oncoming machine.

Breathless, at last he halted. With ears supersharpened by fear he listened. The machine whose sounds he had been conscious of theretofore, had apparently stopped instead, now he detected a crackling noise in the forest behind him.

He waited, and heard more crackling noises. They were pursuing him, tracking him!

The new aspect of the situation, the definite knowledge that he was being followed, made him desperately cool. Like a frightened man balancing himself precariously on a rock in a raging torrent, he was calm from sheer terror.

He began cautiously edging from his former course, taking care not to make revealing sounds or to leave such blaze marks as broken twings. He crept onward for minutes, now and then pausing to listen breathlessly. And gradually the sounds of pursuit swung past him.

Then, abruptly, he came out upon a field and the yard of an old and dilapidated barn. He started moving back into the forest again, shifting his course slightly, and in a moment saw the field once more.

He realized now that in some manner he had strayed into a sliver of forest which extended from the main body, a very narrow sliver with a field on each side. He realized also that were he to attempt returning to the main forest the pursuers could easily cut him off at the place from which the sliver jutted.

Accepting the new state of affairs with no waste of time he darted toward the barn.

A sliding door stood slightly open through this Carew squeezed, finding himself in a gangway flanked by the pole floor of an extinct haymow on one side and by cattle stalls on the other. The whole place was musty and full of cobwebs and exhaled the peculiar atmosphere of long deserted buildings. Light streamed in from a thousand cracks.

Voices sounded outside. Carew supplied his eye to a crack and noted half a dozen men emerge from the woods a few yards aside from the base of the sliver by which he had reached the barn.

Three of the men reëntered the woods, ostensibly to cross the sliver's base; the remaining three stood in a little group regarding the barn and talking amid many gesturings. All of the men had rifles, two of them wore prison guards' garb.

Though the three seemed undecided as to the barn, Carew had no hope that it would long remain unsearched. A blind terror clutched him; he looked wildly for a nook in which he might crawl and be concealed. Below, there was nothing—but perhaps above!—

He looked up. Over the cattle stalls was the ceiling that told of a loft—a loft that possibly contained hay into which he could dig!

He found the loft entrance, a square hole in the ceiling, a ladder led up to it. In a moment he stood on the loft floor. There was no hay!

He was conscious of the voices again, and looked frantically for other forms of concealment, but found none. Affrightedly he dashed back to the hole.

Something struck him across the face. He clawed in the murkiness at the thing that had hit him, and found it a hay rope that dangled from a pully on the roof beam above and trailed its end on the floor beside the hole.

Superstitious horror raced through his body, leaving him faint with weakness. He did not stop to think that it was the most natural thing in the world for a hay rope to be found dangling from the roof of that type of barn. To his terror-stricken mind the thing seemed to have placed itself there for *him,* a gruesome hint of what might easily be the outcome of his flight.

He started down the ladder, but hearing the voices nearer at hand, he had not the courage to descend. Thought left him, his brain was captured by strange animal impulses to shrink with averted eyes into a corner.

He darted to the loft floor again and huddled at its edge, the rope, disturbed a moment before, swinging to and fro and touching him lightly, suggestively.

In desperation he seized the rope to still its sinister swaying motion. His fingers trembled; he began clasping them and unclasping them, shifting the rope through his

hands in a series of spasmodic jerks, while his ears picked up every one of the multitudinous outdoor noises.

The number of voices seemed to have increased; footsteps sounded near and nearer; men seemed to be on all sides of the barn.

"Come out of that!" shouted some one.

There was a long silence, Carew's heart thumping so loudly that he wondered if it could be heard. He tried to still his nervous hands, hands that were causing the rope to grate with a soft but possibly dangerous noise over the floor. He seemed, in his excitement, to have bunched the end of the rope into a curious tangle.

He began laying it down carefully, fearing that a loop of the strange tangle might flop to the floor and be heard. He suddenly looked at the rope, something chilling his soul as he looked. It was not a tangle that he held; it was a *hangman's knot!*

Had he made it himself—made it from force of habit with those nervous hands? He could not remember, nor did the probability that it had thus come into being weaken its message.

For a sickening instant everything seemed to liken itself to a hangman's noose—the cordon of men outside was a gigantic one that was swiftly settling about him and that any moment might tighten with an annihilative jerk; the unknown clew emanating from the murder of Whittaker, the invitation to the hanging of Tracy Stickels, formed another, unseen but effective; his series of incriminating blunders that morning was equivalent to still another!

He dashed his hand across his eyes, his arm touching the rope and causing it to undulate snakishly from floor to roof beam. He watched it with hypnotic fascination.

Like the noose in the prison yard it seemed to possess a spirit; a gruesome knowledge seemed to emanate from it. Carew felt himself quivering in every muscle; he had the sensation that unseen forces had played with him, and were continuing to play with him, as a cat plays with a mouse.

The loft seemed to grow smaller, the hole in the floor larger; the rope seemed to become the governing object, its sinuous quiverings seemingly now caused by a sardonic and unescapable force from above, each movement freighted with an unmistakable meaning.

Again some one called; this time with an oath, the man's voice booming terrifically through the barn's shell-like interior.

"Come on!" Carew heard him say next. "He's in the loft; we might as well get him out of there without any more monkey business!"

He heard the boldly determined ingress of many men. His nervousness vanished. He was hardly conscious of what he did; his actions were calmly automatic, his last vestiges of will power receding before what seemed the will of a relentless fate.

His mind felt possessed by the unseen force that had dogged him. It was causing his hands to do something that had been foreordained.

Men clumped to the planks a dozen or more feet below the square opening; then came the scraping of a foot against a round of the ladder. It was the last sound Carew paused to hear ere he acted, the last *distinct* sound he heard.

For a little less than a second there was a confused roar in his ears, the swish of wind in his face; then not even the swish of wind.

V.

Two prison guards, a visiting sheriff and two visiting deputy marshals, gripped their rifles with instinctive readiness and leaped back as a man came hurtling down upon their very heads. Then the weapons were relaxed in dumb amazement.

The man's feet had not struck the planks. Instead, they kicked in a series of reflex jerkings some two feet above the planks.

"Hanged himself!" ejaculated one of the guards. "Beat us to it!"

"But it ain't our man!" gasped the other of the two guards, peering at the face of the dangling body as it slowly swung about. "That's not Tracy Stickels!"

The sheriff, a grizzled old veteran, spat and eyed the dangling figure critically. "Whoever it is, he sure done a professional job of it!" he voiced succinctly.

THE END

Fair Enough

By WILL McMORROW

"CONGRATULATIONS!"

Bob Peale's eyes, customarily gazing at the world with the hopeful curiosity of twenty-two years, opened even wider when his hand was seized in the soft, moist palm of the man across the desk.

"But, Mr. Parker," he protested, "I have not shown you my references! My experience since I left college was only a bank—"

Reginald Parker's large left hand commanded silence. His right pumped vigorously up and down in accompaniment to his words.

"My boy, I don't want to hear about your experience. As soon as you entered the door I knew you for the type of man we need in this business. I welcome you into the ranks of our selling force! I congratulate you! You are now a supersalesman!"

His bulging, blue eyes radiated encouragement. His smooth, slightly-muffled voice flowed from the depths of a fat-encircled throat in a pleasant, hypnotic drone. The broad pink stripes of his expansive silk shirt beamed prosperity and optimism.

"You are one of the few chosen. You will make good. I know you will make good for the sake of the confidence I am putting in you—for the sake of the old firm—"

He released Bob's hand to wave oratorically toward the glistening windows that looked out upon the brand-new main street of Valhalla Villas. Gold letters, fresh from the hand of the local sign painter, twinkled their urgent invitation to "Buy Now! Get in Right! Ten Dollars Down—Pay Like Rent! Exclusive Valhalla Villas! Parker's Poor Man's Paradise! Parker's Pleasant Plan Purchases Precious Plots! Do It Now!"

"Your golden opportunity is here, boy! Make good for the sake of the girl that waits so patiently—"

Bob shook his head.

"Well! Well! Not yet, eh?" Parker suggested heartily while his left hand groped beneath the desk for the buzzer. "Well, for the sake of your parents—an old mother, perhaps—"

He dropped into the creaking chair, wiped his perspiring forehead and waved Bob to the door.

"Report to the sales manager!"

"But—but the question of salary and —all that," Bob began, weakly.

For a fleeting instant it almost seemed as if Mr. Parker had forgotten all about the old firm and an old mother; it was only an instant's flash. The hard look in the bulging eyes died out quickly and was replaced by a sad and disappointed stare. He became almost pleading.

"Don't tell me I was wrong about you. I know you are not one of those salary-grabbers. Opportunity means more to you than a paltry weekly pittance. You are looking for the thousands, my lad—what am I saying? The tens of thousands—the fortune that lies awaiting every man who sells my lots!"

With his hand on Bob's shoulder he propelled him gently to the door.

"You are no longer a wage slave. You are now a high-priced man. I have given you the opportunity to climb out of the mean, weekly pay-envelope class. I am glad to have given you this opportunity. You are one of the lucky few!"

He clapped Bob paternally on the shoulder, beckoned to another young man who was seated outside the private office waiting for an interview, pointed out to Bob a brass sign marked "Sales Manager" at the end of a long line of desks and clattering typewriters, and closed the door.

The interview with the sales manager was brief.

"My name's Biggers," he muttered, shoving out a thin, cold hand and immediately recovering it from Bob's strong grip. "Just give me your name so we can print cards and arrange for your salesman's license. Start to-morrow morning."

"What commission do I get?" asked Bob, consulting the newspaper advertisement he had answered. "It says here 'largest commissions earned—drawing account.'"

"Well, you get a drawing account after you show your ability, of course. That must have been a printer's error. You keep fifty per cent of all the money you collect for selling lots. Since most of them never finish paying on the installment plan we can't work it otherwise. But there's good money in it—if you're a go-getter and not too bashful with people."

"That's great," assented Bob, doubtfully, "but isn't that an extra big commission?"

Bigger's hand strayed to his mouth.

"Big commision? Oh, my, yes! More than you'd get from other companies. Big money—fine money—when you get it," he added under his breath.

He nodded shortly and turned to his desk.

"See you to-morrow morning, Peale."

Out in the main thoroughfare of Valhalla Villas, Bob took stock of things generally and his new profession particularly.

It sounded like a promising field for a man with what Parker had called "creative imagination." Fifty per cent on a single sale of one lot, advertised on huge canvas signs as worth two hundred dollars, would net him a neat sum and one plot a week would mean just about three times the salary the bank had paid him.

Besides it was outdoor work and that was what the doctor had recommended—nothing serious, of course, but—business of tapping chest with stethoscope and raising eyebrows warningly—a trifle run down—must watch your step—weak lungs in the family—nothing to worry about—but get outdoors more.

Bob expanded his chest. Of course there was nothing to worry about. He had played too much football on the high school team to doubt his strength. Still, he was glad he was through with the bank.

He walked across a hay field, staked out in neat, white posts, on his way to the trolley, inadvertently passing through a brick high school, two Gothic churches, a

row of stores and a theater with a massive concrete retaining wall as if they were thin air—as indeed they were, appearing only in the " creative imagination " and colorful folders of Reginald Parker.

Bob was forced to detour around the " exclusive and fashionable Valhalla Villas Golf Course " since, in spite of Mr. Parker's prospectus, it obstinately remained a corn field and a sadly neglected fish pond. Any one using a Parker's Pleasant Plan map to tour that section of country would have been decidedly out of luck.

Some distance off, on the edge of the swamp, a man stood in front of a little group of attentive people and waved a bundle of blue prints and pointed and harangued like an Arabian magician about to change the stunted pines into storied palaces and the shoddy grass into shady groves.

A trolley car swayed along the track and stopped at Bob's signal.

" Climb on board! One at a time! Stand back and give the crowd room!" shouted the motorman-conductor, humorously.

" Busy spot this Parker's Place and Grand Central Boulevard," he continued, winking broadly at Bob. " What they need here is traffic regulation. Why, do you know when the crowd pours out of that Valhalla Villas Opera House—the one that's green shaded with pink on the map—and mixes with the stream of cars crossing the Promenade Parkette—named after old ' Blah ' himself, believe me—"

" Who is old Blah?" inquired Bob dropping his nickel into the open palm of the motorman-conductor and taking a seat in the empty car.

The motorman absent-mindedly toyed with the nickel and seemed to perform a stage trick with it. It disappeared and reappeared in his other hand, then vanished from sight abruptly.

" Bet you never saw that trick?" he conjectured, hopefully. " Seems like I can do it well and again not so well. It helps to pass the time. Sometimes I lose one, but you can't expect everything to be profit. Well, so you mean to tell me you don't know who old Blah is?"

The car lurched past the salesman with the blue print and his attentive group of buyers. The blue print swept in a graceful curve upward and the salesman's hands gestured toward a corner lot occupied by a fence post and a pile of rusty tin cans. He had the rapt expression of a seer.

" I'll roll 'em if you smoke 'em," muttered the motorman, cryptically.

" One of old Blah's men," he informed Bob, jerking his thumb in the direction of the vanishing salesman. " Just like Parker himself, too, I'll bet—full of easy talk and pipe dreams and a heart like a codfish. That crowd would give a bunch of subway pickpockets an awful run for their money if they ever got mixed up with them. Old Blah! If that guy talks in his sleep he's telling himself lies all night. He's so crooked he has to use a washboard to press his clothes on. He could persuade a baby to hand over his bottle and then—"

" Are you referring to the man I'm going to work for?" Bob protested. " Do you mean Mr. Parker?"

" Oh, well, if you're going to work for him—enough said!" and the motorman became engrossed in the management of the car.

II.

Bob was the first on the ground the next morning at the office of the Parker Development Company. This was partly due to his having to borrow the landlady's ironing board to press his only presentable suit of clothes. It was partly due to anxiety as to his first day as a salesman.

Slowly the office filled up with workers. For the most part they were young men of Bob's age with a quick, nervous manner, well-pressed suits of fashionable cut, tooth-displaying smiles, crushing hand-grips and the keen and bulging eyes of Reginald Parker himself.

They might have been easily mistaken for brothers. There was a kind of Parker family resemblance throughout.

Their talk was encouraging to Bob, running as it did carelessly to thousands of dollars. This effect was only partly offset by a heated discussion between two Parkerites apparently concerning a loan of two dollars

and fifty cents which it developed had not been paid.

Bob found Biggers slightly more communicative than he had been on the previous day.

"You're in luck, Peale!" he began, rubbing his chin and watching the new salesman sideways. "The boss is putting you on to something big. He mentioned you especially."

"I'll do my best," said Bob earnestly.

Biggers nodded, still caressing his chin.

"Sure. That's the spirit. Of course, you understand you've got to learn the ropes from the ground up. In fact, this being the real estate business we won't kick even if you only learn it from the ground sideways covering as many acres as you can. Now, what do you suppose is the first thing for you to do—I'll leave it to you!"

"Fair enough!" Bob studied the question.

"Why, I suppose I ought to find out all about the real estate I am going to sell," he decided finally, "and get a list of people to sell to."

Biggers brightened visibly.

"Exactly!" he exclaimed. "You will be a success at this line. You've hit the nail on the head. Just the proper angle—to find out all about the property. That's what the boss said, too. So instead of trying to sell lots at first, our system is for a beginner to travel around and get what we call listings—that is, interview owners of property and find out if they want to sell and what their price is. You get all the details and turn them into the office here and then you and the other salesmen go to work on them. The boss buys the property and cuts it up into cute little plots for Mr. and Mrs. General Public and you get the chance to sell them. How's that?"

"But I don't make any money meanwhile. I haven't got much—"

"Meanwhile you're learning the business. It won't take long for a bright young fellow like you. Only a week or so. Now, there's a certain tract of land the boss is anxious to buy, but the owner may need some persuading. You are the man picked out to get the price and terms. The boss seems to take to you.

"Here it is on the map. The owner's name is Dyckman and a nice old fellow, too, —only rather hard to find. Out most of the time. Kind of bashful, I guess—you know the type. When you locate him slip him one of these cards and wake him up. See if you can't talk him into giving you a price on his farm."

"Maybe he doesn't want to sell his farm at all."

"That's where your salesmanship comes in. Here! Go to it!"

Bob accepted the shiny brief case offered to him and read the gold-lettered caption emblazoned on its surface: "Parker Development Company."

"Here. Take these too."

Biggers handed him a dozen or so business cards tastefully engraved in two colors with as much information concerning the Parker projects as could be fitted in. Bob's name was typewritten on each, under the title "Field Representative." It gave him an added sense of really being employed. Moreover there was a dignified tone to the title.

"Follow the Grand Central Boulevard a half mile to a dirt road. The Dyckman place is off to the right. But don't let him scare you."

"Scare me?" Bob smiled over his shoulder. "Why should he?"

Biggers felt the small of his back meditatively, where his neat gabardine sport-coat clung to the contours of his scanty frame and allowed himself a careful smile.

"Well, beginners sometimes have stage-fright. Go get him," he urged.

His close-set eyes followed Bob's vanishing figure and he leaned back, pensively tapping a gold-filled pencil against a gold-filled tooth.

One of the hard-gripping, brilliant young men sauntered to the sales manager's desk. He jerked his head in the direction of the door.

"Starting a new one, Biggers? Leads or listings?"

"Listings," Biggers said shortly. "Going to see old man Dyckman to get his farm for sale."

The salesman whistled and craned his neck to get a better view through the of-

fice window of the man who was going to interview old man Dyckman.

"What's the idea, Biggers? Got anything against this young fellow. Old man Dyckman hasn't had a square meal off a real estate broker since Julius Cæsar was a first sergeant. His appetite ought to be right sharp by now."

"Somebody has to break the ice," snapped Biggers. "We got to get that property for sale and this guy doesn't know any better. The boss is nuts over it—two hundred acres and just laying right for the finest development in Westchester—there's a pile of money waiting for the right man when the new trolley line goes through."

"You bet! Also there's a mean pile waiting for the fellow that licks Jack Dempsey, but I'm no man-eater. Say, didn't you try to talk the old gentleman into selling his farm one time?"

"Maybe I did," Biggers answered sourly. "I didn't have the proper *entrée*. Won't do any harm to try again."

"*Entrée* or no *entrée*, I'll bet you made the proper exit."

Biggers felt the small of his back again and scowled. There was an unpleasant memory of several painful hours when a long-suffering wife had carefully extracted a round dozen buckshot lodged in the vicinity of Biggers's backbone. Old man Dyckman had given Biggers only ten seconds' start that time and Biggers had not closed with that sporting offer promptly.

"Here," he grunted, "is a list of the wills probated yesterday. Maybe you can try some of your bright stuff where it will do the most good. Try the widows—sound investment—plan number two is the stuff for them. And don't pull any of your graveyard jokes to get a laugh out of them. On your way now!"

III.

Along the line of white posts marking the future corners of a thriving village and, very likely, the financial graves of many small investors, Bob strode happily. It was pleasant to be out in the country all the time—almost like a perpetual vacation with pay, and the pay was going to be big. A few lots sold each month—say only two a month—any live salesman should do that much with a good, respectable real estate firm behind him—a little money ahead at the end of a year and perhaps a real estate office of his own—perhaps a chance to go ahead with that law course interrupted so abruptly—

He stopped and looked around him.

It occurred to him that he had walked easily a distance of two miles and still no sign of the dirt road off to the right. True to the Parker training even in small matters Biggers had exaggerated the distance a trifle.

A small touring car, fenders sagging and top caved in, swept by him in a cloud of dust, started up the narrow road leading over a hill, stopped, coughed, shook and was still. As it started to roll down hill Bob dropped his new brief case, picked up a large stone from the side of the road and dropped it behind a rear wheel.

"I guess your brakes are weak," he shouted through the dust.

A head, topped with an old straw hat with bulging crown and fringed with white whiskers, poked itself out the side of the car. Two cold blue eyes glared at the good Samaritan and a bony finger pointed to the stone behind the wheel.

"Ain't askin' nobody to smash my wheels fer me."

Bob examined the wheel carefully.

"No harm done there," he answered cheerfully. "I was afraid you'd roll into the ditch. Can you tell me where Dyckman's farm is?"

"Don't know why I should. That's my farm, young fellow, and if you're looking to sell me anything you can keep away. I got all the books and sewing machines and tractors I'm going to need—and that's none!"

Bob stooped for his brief case and walked to the side of the car. Old man Dyckman scanned the gold lettering and his eyes shone with the glad light of battle. He groped behind him.

"Get the gun, Joan! Darn my hide if it ain't a real estater!"

"I'll do no such thing, grandpa. You

ought to be ashamed to act that way. Any one would think you were a regular old gunman!"

Bewildered and suspecting a joke, Bob looked from the wrathful old man in the front seat to the pretty girl in the rear of the car.

"Well!" he managed at last. "This is great stuff. What's the idea?"

She hopped lightly into the road, a trim figure in cool green.

"There is no gun, really," she assured him. "That's partly a gesture."

Bob grinned.

"I would just as soon have it altogether a gesture. Safety first."

"It isn't his fault, altogether, either," she asserted, loyally. "He's been pestered to death with real estate salesmen chasing him to get him to sell his farm and hiding in hay stacks to jump out at him and calling him up at all hours of the night to sign some papers."

"Well, I haven't been guilty, anyway," protested Bob. "Why, I only started to work this morning for the Parker outfit."

The indignant brown eyes softened.

"I suppose every one must make a living somehow."

"And they started you off by sending you out here to see me?" queried Dyckman, his voice suspiciously calm.

"Yes. Mr. Parker wants to get a price on your farm. He thinks it may be for sale. I was told you were kind of hard to find—a little bit backward in dealing with real estate salesmen. It's a sort of test they gave me."

"They said I was backward with real estaters—" Dyckman gulped painfully. "Why darn their measly—"

"Now, grandpa. You're exciting yourself again."

"And I suppose you get well paid fer sneakin' around pestering folks," suggested old man Dyckman tartly.

Bob's temper began to get the better of him.

"I'm not sneaking around as you call it. I'm trying to make a living and if you weren't such a crabbed—"

"Heavens! Are you going to lose your temper? I never heard such men!"

"I ain't goin' to eat him—yet," Dyckman muttered sourly. "So that old crook is getting people to work for him for nothing. More fool you!"

"Thanks!" Bob said shortly. "But how about your farm?"

Old man Dyckman scratched the leathery back of his neck and gazed off at the horizon, one eye closed, a speculative glint in the other.

"I dunno," he said cautiously. "Maybe I might sell at that. Suppose you jump in here and we'll take a look at the map. There might be something in it after all. No, get in back with Joan. I ain't used to salesmen yet."

Seated by his side on the rear seat Joan looked the strange young man over appraisingly.

"I must say you don't look like a real estate salesman," she conceded.

"I'm fooling you," Bob laughed. "I'm much worse than I look."

The ride took only three minutes by the clock, but in that time Bob managed to confide quite a lot about himself, the real estate business and his expectations in life to the friendly questioner beside him.

"Live, horse, and eat grass," was Dyckman's only comment until the car bumped into a driveway leading to a weather-beaten house.

He led the way into a mid-Victorian parlor furnished with a curio cabinet, three plush-upholstered chairs, a sofa and a table with a marble top. From the bottom shelf of the cabinet he took a bundle of papers, thumbed them over and brought out an old map.

He unrolled it on the table and placed a knuckly finger on a spot in the center.

"There y'are, young fellow. Go back to your boss and tell him them five acres is fer sale. It would make a fine development. It's in a quiet section and blamed exclusive. That's all I'm ready to sell now. He can find it all right. Let him take that road outside to the next cross-roads and turn left. He can't miss it. After he looks it over he can get in touch with me about signing the contract and deed."

"What's the price?" asked Bob briskly.

"Well, there's one or two tenants on the

ground now, but he can wake them up and buy them out. They got short leases. We'll say a hundred dollars an acre. Ain't that cheap enough?"

Bob picked up his hat.

"I should think so," he said judiciously. "A fair price. I'll get him busy on it."

Outside the door Joan was practicing driving with a well-worn golf stick and a wad of paper for a ball.

"I'm certainly surprised grandpa changed his mind about selling," she said, walking beside Bob to the road. "He has been so obstinate about it so far. I am glad, too. It means money to spend on dresses for me and all the rest of the foolish femininities—I own a quarter share that was my mother's, you know."

"I didn't do so badly, I guess," said Bob happily. "Considering it is my first deal."

"You must be very clever."

"Beginner's luck," laughed Bob. "Maybe I may come back and tell you all about it—if you'll let me."

"Please do!"

Perspiring but triumphant Bob walked into the noisy office of the Parker Development Company and strode over to Biggers's desk. The latter was arguing in a loud voice with a timid-looking woman in black. Biggers stopped pounding his desk with closed fist to stare at Bob.

"Well, I got it, Biggers!"

"Got what?" Biggers's hand strayed to the small of his back. "Don't you go blaming me. The boss is the one—"

He turned a shade paler as Bob grasped him by the arm.

"I got the Dyckman place, of course—that's what you sent me after, wasn't it? Part of it anyway is for sale—come over here!"

He drew Biggers to the map on the wall.

"Isn't that old man Dyckman's place?"

"Yes."

"I had better tell Mr. Parker about it, hadn't I?"

"Yes. Go right in, Mr. Peale, go right in."

Mr. Parker, resplendent in silk shirt of blue stripes, was standing beside his desk in a Daniel Webster attitude as Bob walked in. Parker started back, looked searchingly into Bob's face and extended a soft and perspiring hand.

"My boy, I congratulate you!"

"How did you know about it so soon," asked Bob in amazed tones.

"I knew as soon as you entered this office that you were the type of man I want in this business! Many are called—few are chosen. Fifty men might answer my advertisement, but I know a born salesman—"

"But, Mr. Parker, I wanted to see you about—"

"I want to hear nothing about your past experience. You are here to make good if not for my sake for the sake of the old—"

"No! You've got me wrong! I'm hired already. It's the Dyckman property I wanted to see you about. He is offering it for sale."

Mr. Parker's prominent eyes wavered for a moment, but he recovered smartly. His success was built on quick recoveries, hasty answers, rapid covering-up.

"What did I say? I knew you could do it. Let me see what you have!"

Carefully Bob spread out the dog-eared map he had brought from Dyckman's and located the five acres. Parker was slightly disappointed.

"He's only selling part of it," he complained. "A peculiar man! Opposed to progress in any form. A violent man I am told, too. However, it's something."

He straightened up.

"Now to work! Tell Biggers to get out some of the largest signs from our stock. Post them right away. Then we will run an ad in the papers and this afternoon I'll look the property over myself. We've got a foothold there at last. The firm is proud of you, Mr. Peale."

He waved Bob away.

"Send Biggers in."

Bob gave Biggers the message.

"You bet!" Biggers answered. "We'll get out some of the real snappy signs. Suppose you dive downstairs and bring some up. I'll get the regular sign-poster to go with you and put them up. Leave them outside the door."

Coming out into the street, lugging a

half dozen bulky canvas signs, Bob found old man Dyckman sitting in the tumble-down car in front of the office. He glanced suspiciously at Bob.

"What's that?" he snapped. "I ain't goin' to have those stuck up just any old place. Just leave them there for a minute, and say—"

He beckoned Bob to come nearer.

"How much they payin' you? You're a purty smart lad."

"Well," Bob admitted, "I'm not drawing anything right now. I'm just picking up the business."

"Gettin' that farm of mine fer sale was worth something to them, I guess," ventured Dyckman. "Why don't you hit while the iron is hot? Ask your boss fer a small salary. I'll back you up."

"There's something in that," pondered Bob. "Listing men are well paid I imagine. I think I'll try it. He can only refuse."

"Sure. That's the idea. I'll wait to see you when you come out."

As Bob passed through the outer office the supersalesmen of Parker's Pleasant Plan were crowded about the window watching with the fearful interest of a crowd in front of a lion's cage, the belligerent whiskers and arrogant red nose of old man Dyckman in profile.

"I hardly believed you until I saw you talking to him," said Biggers affably. "Nice old fellow, isn't he?"

"Found him very pleasant indeed, Mr. Biggers. Is the boss busy?"

Biggers shook his head and darted for another look at old man Dyckman.

The broad expanse of Mr. Parker's back was turned to the door when Bob entered. The owner of many silk shirts and many more pleasant plots was deeply engrossed in plans and pleasanter plots for separating the small investor from his money and giving in exchange a thinly-cut slice of the Dyckman farm.

He whirled about in his swivel-chair, but caught back the extended hand in time.

"Ah! Yes, Mr.—"

"Peale. I—I wanted to ask a favor. What I mean is I—"

"Anything, my boy. Don't hesitate."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Parker, I'm sure. I wanted to know if I couldn't get a small salary now—enough to pay my expenses while I'm selling the Dyckman plottage. It will only be for a few weeks and everybody seems to think that that was a pretty lucky find for the firm—"

The large hand, raised commandingly, stopped him. Mr. Parker seemed to be struggling with an overmastering emotion. Sadness settled in the fat folds of his face.

"I was afraid of this," he said pityingly. "You have hurt me deeply. No. Don't say anything. The harm is done. It can never be the same again. I hoped for better things from you—well, it's over now. All we can do is to part as good friends as possible. I am sure that, personally, I bear you no ill will."

Bob's mouth dropped open.

"Do you mean I'm through here?" he gasped.

Parker nodded.

"I have been thinking your case over. I'm afraid you will not make a salesman after all. I had meant to tell you this before."

"But you let me work for nothing getting Dyckman's property," exclaimed Bob. "Now that you have it I'm not to have the chance to make a commission on the sales."

"There was no agreement, my poor fellow, concerning listings. You were to get a generous commission for selling property not for listing it for sale," soothed Parker. "Any one more familiar with the business would tell you that no salesmanship is necessary to sell the Dyckman plot. It will sell itself. We must part. Let us do it gracefully."

"Why, this is a downright skin game!"

"That was just a happy fluke you pulled off this morning," blandly continued Parker. "You probably could not do it again."

Bob's face tightened.

"Maybe I was foolish not to have an agreement with you beforehand. Maybe it was only a happy fluke. But at the same time I would like to punch you once in the eye, you fat four-flusher!"

Parker jumped up quickly for so large a person, backed hurriedly and laid his hand on the office window.

"You are losing your temper. I'm very much afraid you are losing your temper," he stuttered. "As you see, the local policeman is passing the door and if I am forced to knock on this window I will feel it my duty to press a charge of attempted assault. I would suggest that you go out peaceably —very peaceably!"

The policeman, star glittering on his gray uniform, passed in front of the window and nodded respectfully to Mr. Parker, who bowed benignly. His soft, upraised hand seemed to bestow a parting blessing on the guardian of law and order.

Bob glared helplessly for a moment, picked up his hat and turned to the door.

"Peaceably, my friend," the smooth voice followed him, "and try to think more charitably of your fellow men. A few kind words to your neighbor, a kind deed—"

The slamming of the door punctuated the homily.

Bob looked up and down the half paved street. Old man Dyckman had disappeared. Bob walked disconsolately toward the distant trolley line, trying to straighten the business out in his mind.

He had been nicely tricked all around. He felt like kicking himself soundly.

First of all that smooth hypocrite back there with his widow-and-orphan robbing schemes gets him to do a tough job for nothing and then fires him rather than pay him. Then old man Dyckman—a fine piece of advice he gave him. Maybe he would be interested in knowing what had happened. Then again—Bob recollected a pair of sympathetic, brown eyes—there might be an explanation.

He turned into the road leading to Dyckman's farm. Raindrops, threatening to fall all day, began to make tiny, black spots in the gray dust. He turned his coat-collar up and trudged on, gradually becoming soaked to the skin. He felt thoroughly miserable.

The familiar sagging top of a small touring car bobbed around a curve of the road and slid toward him with a whining of brakes. Around one side of the misty windshield familiar white whiskers and an old straw hat showed up. Around the other end a brown, bobbed head appeared.

"Thought I'd catch you before you left for the city," shouted old man Dyckman. "Jump in. I got something to say to you."

Bob frowned and shook his head.

"So you knew I was fired!"

"I know lots of things, young fellow, and lots more than most folks think, too, as I'm going to show some of them."

"That was a fine piece of advice you gave me back there. I wish you had known more about that."

"Aren't you coming with us?" asked Joan. "Grandpa wants to surprise us."

Bob climbed in beside her.

"After to-day nothing can surprise me," he said gloomily.

"I've been pestered to death with those danged smart Alecks," complained Dyckman, backing the car around, "all telling me how to run my business and waiting to grab my property fer a song. Here, now, this is the edge of my farm—running over to that brook and across the farther hill. How do you think that site would do fear a real estate office?"

He stopped the car with a jerk.

"Very fine," said Bob moodily; "thinking of starting a development?"

"Maybe I might. A street running along the meadow and another beside the brook with maybe tennis courts where that field is and a store or two where the new trolley line cuts across the road back farther—a lake in that hollow—what are ye grinnin' at?"

"It seems to be in the air," Bob answered; "sounds like Parker himself."

"Don't go comparin' me with that skunk! What I'm talkin' about is a real honest-to-God community out here with real people—no fancy opery-house and Parker literature. I got the money, I guess. There's three hundred acres of the best land in Westchester. Run right it will make Parker shut up shop an' move to Florida. He can't sell alongside us fer we got the goods."

"Sounds good," commented Bob.

"Yes," continued Dyckman, "these real estaters taught me a thing or two. If they can do it, I says, why so can I. And I been thinkin' it over. I got you fired from Parker's I admit—"

"You did?"

"Yep. I know that old skinflint. I knowed he'd fire you rather than pay a salary. So I gave you that advice to brace him fer—"

"What was the idea?"

"Well, I don't want no kind of law trouble with that crew. You can't work fer two firms at once and I wanted you to work fer me—and again I wanted you to see what kind of a worm you were workin' fer. What d'ye say? D'ye want to run this development business fer me?"

"Why—why—I don't know enough about real estate dev—"

"You'll do right enough!" the old man snapped. "I'm plumb tired of smart young fellows that know it all. I got a man to do the technical end of the business. I want some one I can trust to handle the money end.

"I'll build the office here. You will get seventy-five dollars a week and five per cent of the gross sales. That ought to net you five or six thousand a year—and not another cent you'll get," he finished savagely.

Bob looked blankly at Joan's laughing eyes.

"Grandpa is such an old bluff," she sighed. "You'd think he was a terrible crank. He does nice things in the crabbedest way. Do you know he has been talking about you and planning this all the way out."

"It's just plain horse-sense!" Dyckman shouted. "Nothin' but plain business. I'm as tough as they make 'em and more. Do you want the job?"

Bob reached for the gnarled hand.

"It's a bargain."

Dyckman started the car again and they rode some distance along the boundaries of the farm.

"How about that property that you offered to sell Parker?" inquired Bob after awhile.

"I didn't offer to sell Parker anything—nothing I owned anyway. We're coming to that now. And I guess old Parker will have to exercise some Christian patience to live down the joke when it gets around this neck of the woods. What d'ye think of that? I picked up those signs myself."

He pointed to the right.

Beside the road, a straggling but neglected cemetery covered a couple of acres. It had not been used of late years and weeds had sprung up among the falling tombstones. Stuck prominently here and there and nailed securely to the few trees were Biggers's snappy slogans in bold, staring letters.

"A Real Wide-awake Development As Parker Does It," "Buy Now," "Ask The Man That Owns A Plot," "A Plot Here Means A Permanent Home For The Future," "Parker's Pleasant Plan Will Bring You Into One of These Pleasant and Permanent Plots."

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"Don't Wait! Join This Exclusive Community! Parker Will Help You."

Old man Dyckman scratched the left side of his prominent nose thoughtfully. He closed one cold blue eye and looked off to the horizon.

"Maybe they will leave me—I mean us—alone after this!"

THE END

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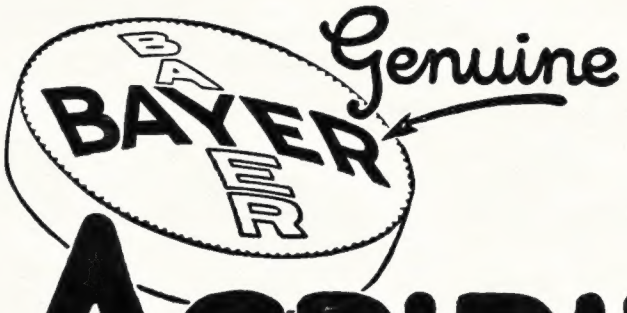

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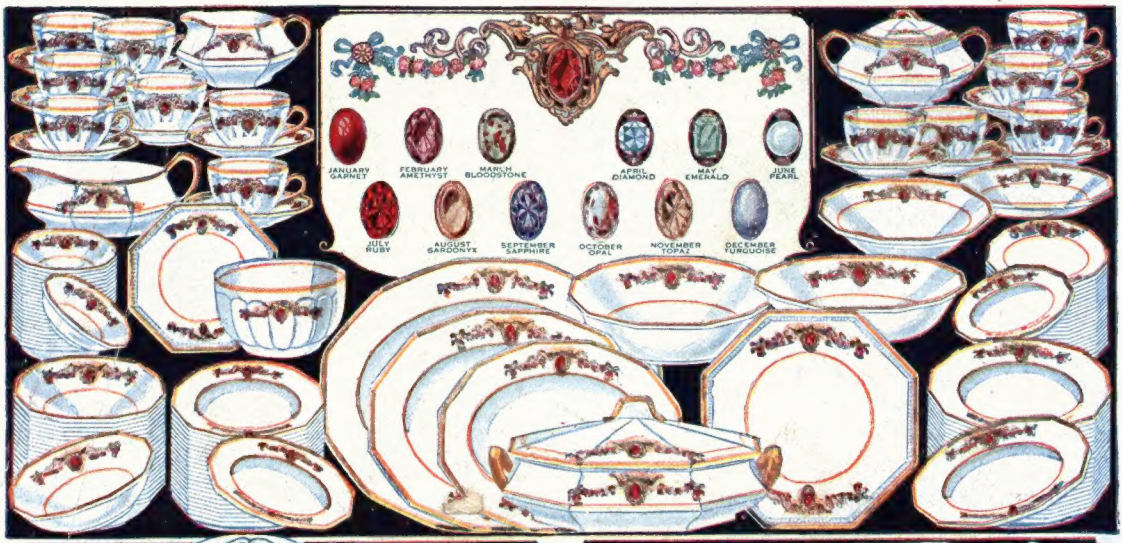

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